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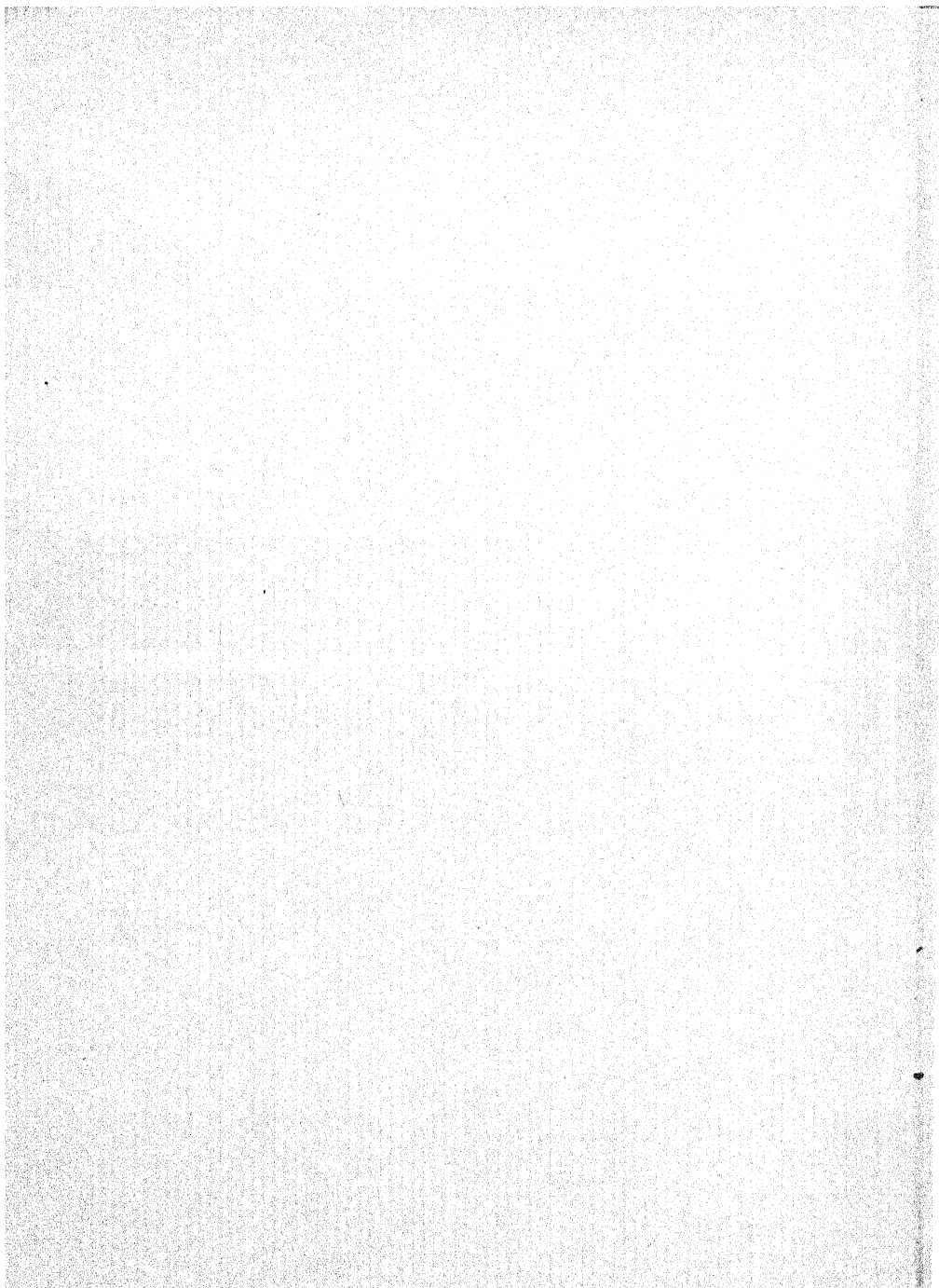
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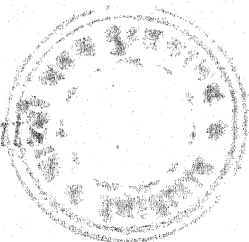
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Contents



MY COUSIN RACHEL . . . Page 7

By Daphne du Maurier

PUBLISHED BY VICTOR GOLLANCZ

THE SILENT WORLD . . . Page 185

By J. Y. Cousteau, with Frédéric Dumas

PUBLISHED BY HAMISH HAMILTON

THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER Page 223

By Davis Grubb

PUBLISHED BY HAMISH HAMILTON

A GENIUS IN THE FAMILY . Page 353

By Hiram Percy Maxim

PUBLISHED BY MICHAEL JOSEPH

APHRODITE MEANS DEATH . Page 387

By John Appleby

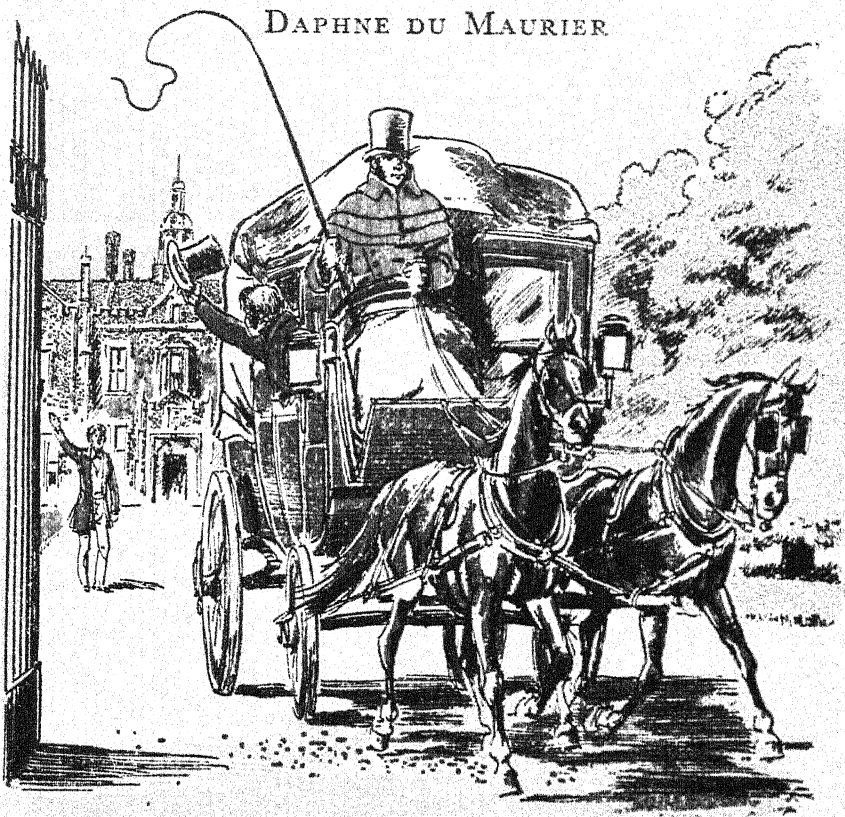
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My Cousin Rachel

A condensation of the book by

DAPHNE DU MAURIER



"My Cousin Rachel" is published by Victor Gollancz, London

DAPHNE DU MAURIER's famous best seller, *My Cousin Rachel*, is a haunting and enthralling novel of Victorian times. Romance, mystery and creeping suspense are woven together as young Philip Ashley, bachelor heir to a great estate in Cornwall, tries to decipher the ominous facts surrounding his beautiful and artful cousin—and finds himself caught in a whirlpool of events and emotions that may spell lifelong happiness or utter disaster.

My Cousin Rachel has all the ingredients that made Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* one of the most widely read books of its time. But *Rachel* has something more: you, the reader, must decide for yourself whether Rachel Ashley is one of the most enchanting heroines in fiction—or one of the most sinister.

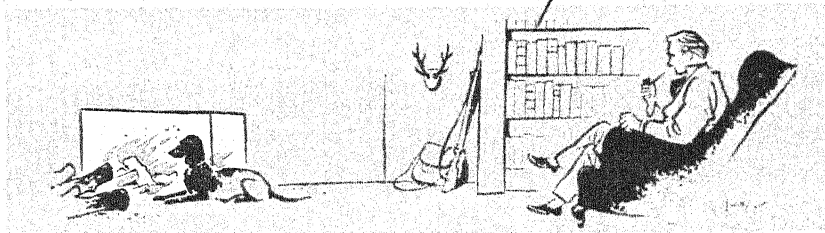
"Double-distilled readers' delight."

—Elizabeth Jenkins in the *Manchester Guardian*

"It will keep thousands of people dithering with excitement."

—Howard Spring in *Country Life*

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CHAPTER 1

THEY used to hang men at Four Turnings in the old days. Not any more, though. Now, when a murderer pays the penalty for his crime, he does so up at Bodmin, after fair trial at the Assizes. That is, if the law convicts him before his own conscience kills him. It is better so. Like a surgical operation. And the body has decent burial, though a nameless grave. When I was a child it was otherwise. I can remember as a little lad seeing a fellow hang in chains where the four roads meet.

He swung between earth and sky upon his gibbet, or, as my cousin Ambrose told me, betwixt heaven and hell. Heaven he would never achieve, and the hell that he had known was lost to him. I can see him now, moving with the wind like a weather-vane on a rusty pivot, a poor scarecrow of what had been a man.

It was winter, and some passing joker had placed a sprig of holly in the torn vest for celebration. Somehow, at seven years old, that seemed to me the final outrage, but I said nothing. Ambrose must have taken me there for a purpose, perhaps to test my nerve. As my guardian, father, brother, counsellor, as in fact my whole world, he was forever testing me.

"There you are, Philip," he said. "It's what we all come to in the end. Some upon a battlefield, some in bed, others according to their destiny. You can't learn the lesson too young. But this is how a felon dies. A warning to you and me to lead the sober life." We stood there watching the body swing, as though we were on a jaunt to Bodmin Fair, and the corpse was old Sally to be hit for

coconuts. "See what a moment of passion can bring upon a fellow," said Ambrose. "Here is Tom Jenkyn, honest and dull, except when he drank too much. It's true his wife was a scold, but that was no excuse to kill her. If we killed women for their tongues all men would be murderers."

Well, that was all of eighteen years ago, and to the best of my recollection I have not thought much of it since. Until these last few days. It is strange how in moments of great crisis the mind whips back to childhood. Somehow I keep thinking of poor Tom and how he hung there in his chains. I never heard his story, and few people would remember it now. If there is survival after death, I shall seek out poor Tom and question him. We will dream in purgatory together. Meanwhile, life has to be endured and lived. But how to live it is the problem. The work of day by day presents no difficulties. I shall become a Justice of the Peace, as Ambrose was, and also be returned one day to Parliament. I shall continue to be honoured and respected, like all my family before me. Farm the land well, look after the people. No one will ever guess the burden of blame I carry on my shoulders; nor will they know that every day I ask myself a question which I cannot answer. Was Rachel innocent or guilty?

How soft and gentle her name sounds when I whisper it. It lingers on the tongue, insidious and slow, almost like poison, which is apt indeed. It passes from the tongue to the parched lips, and from the lips back to the heart. Shall I be free of it one day? In forty, in fifty years?

I still have the house to cherish, which Ambrose would have me do. I can keep all sound and well and in repair. Leave some legacy of beauty when I go, if nothing else. But a lonely man is an unnatural man, and soon comes to perplexity. From perplexity to fantasy. From fantasy to madness. And so I swing back again to Tom Jenkyn. Perhaps he suffered, too.

Ambrose, those eighteen years ago, went striding away from the gibbet, and I in wake of him. He may well have worn the jacket I am wearing now. This old green shooting jacket with the leather padding on the elbows. I have become so like him that

I might be his ghost. My eyes are his eyes, my features his features. I have wondered lately if, when he died, his mind tortured by doubt and fear, feeling himself forsaken and alone in that damned Italian villa where I could not reach him, whether his spirit left his body and came home here to mine, taking possession, so that he lived again in me, repeating his own mistakes, caught the disease once more and perished twice. It may be so. All I know is that my likeness to him, of which I was so proud, proved my undoing. Had I been another man, agile and quick, with a deft tongue and a shrewd head for business, the past year would have been no more than another twelve months come and gone.

But I was none of these things, nor was Ambrose. We were dreamers, both of us, unpractical, reserved, full of great theories never put to test, and, like all dreamers, asleep to the waking world. We craved affection, but shyness kept impulse dormant until the heart was touched. When that happened the heavens opened, and we felt, the pair of us, that we had the whole wealth of the universe to give. We would have both survived had we been other men. Rachel would have come here just the same, spent a night or two, and gone her way. Matters of business would have been discussed, the will read formally with lawyers round a table, and I—summing up the position in a glance—would have given her an annuity for life, and so been quit of her.

It did not happen that way because I looked like Ambrose. It did not happen that way because I felt like Ambrose. When I went up to her room that first evening she arrived, and she got up from the chair by the window and looked up at me, I should have known, from the glance of recognition in her eyes, that it was not me she saw, but Ambrose. Not Philip, but a phantom. She should have gone then. Packed up her trunks and left.

But there is no going back in life. There is no second chance.

It was my godfather, Nick Kendall, who, in his bluff straightforward fashion, said to me on the eve of my twenty-fifth birthday—a few months ago only, yet God! how long in time—“There are some women, Philip, good women, very possibly, who through no fault of their own impel disaster. Whatever they touch

somehow turns to tragedy. I don't know why I say this to you, but I feel I must." And then he witnessed my signature on the document that I had put before him.

CHAPTER 2

I HAD no sense of foreboding when Ambrose and I sat talking together that last evening, before he set out on his final journey. No premonition that we would never be together again. It was now the third autumn that the doctors had ordered him to winter abroad, and I had become used to his absence and to looking after the estate while he was away.

I never had any desire to be anywhere but at home. Apart from my schooldays at Harrow and afterwards at Oxford, I had never lived in any place but this house, where I had come at the age of eighteen months after my young parents died. Ambrose, in his queer, generous way, was seized with pity for his small orphaned cousin, and so brought me up himself, as he might have done a puppy or a kitten.

Ours was a strange sort of household from the first. He sent my nurse packing when I was three years old because she smacked my bottom with a hair-brush. I don't remember the incident, but he told me later.

"It made me so damnably angry," he said to me, "to see that woman belabouring your small person with her great coarse hands for some trifling misdemeanour that she was too unintelligent to comprehend. After that I corrected you myself."

I never had reason to regret it. There could not be a man more fair, more just, more lovable, more full of understanding. Although invariably courteous, he was shy of women, and mistrustful too, saying they made mischief in a household. Therefore he would employ only menservants, and the tribe was controlled by old Seecombe, who had been my uncle's steward.

Eccentric perhaps, unorthodox—but Ambrose was no crank. He was liked and respected by his neighbours and loved by his tenants. He shot and hunted in the winter, before rheumatism

got a grip on him, fished in the summer, dined out and entertained when he had the mind to do so, went twice to church of a Sunday, and endeavoured to induce in me his passion for the planting of rare shrubs.

"It's a form of creation," he used to say, "like anything else. Some men go in for breeding. I prefer growing things from the soil. It takes less out of you, and the result is far more satisfying."

That shocked my godfather, Nick Kendall, and Hubert Pascoe, the vicar, and others who used to urge him to settle down to domestic bliss and rear a family instead of rhododendrons.

I can see him now, half hunched, half sprawling in his chair, shaking with silent laughter when the vicar made his timid ineffectual remonstrance, and then, fearing he might have hurt the man's feelings, passing on to matters where the vicar would be at ease. I came to appreciate Ambrose the more when I went to Harrow. The holidays passed all too swiftly as I compared his manners and his company with the urchins who were my school-mates, and the masters, stiff and sober, lacking to my mind all humanity.

"Never mind," he used to say, patting my shoulder before I started off, white-faced, a trifle tearful, to catch the coach to London. "It's just a training process, like breaking in a horse; we have to face it. Once your schooldays are behind you, I'll bring you home here for good and train you myself."

"Train me for what?" I asked.

"Well, you're my heir, aren't you? That's a profession in itself."

He reckoned without his health, though, and when school and university lay behind me it was then his turn to go. "They tell me if I spend another winter being rained on every day I shall end my days crippled in a bath-chair," he said to me. "I must go off and search for the sun. Anywhere on the Mediterranean where it is dry and warm. I don't want to go, but on the other hand I'm damned if I'll end my life a cripple. There is one advantage in the plan. I shall bring back plants that nobody else has got."

The first winter came and went, likewise the second. He enjoyed himself well enough, and I don't think he was lonely. He

returned with heaven knows how many trees, shrubs, flowers of every form and colour. Camellias were his passion. We started a plantation for them alone, and they flourished from the first.

So the months passed, until the third winter. This time he had decided upon Italy. Someone had assured him that the air would be dry, if cold, and that he need not have any fear of rain. We talked late, that last evening, both of us with our long legs stretched out before the fire, the dogs curled round our feet. He kept looking at me in a puzzled, reflective way, and from me to the panelled walls of the room and the familiar pictures.

"I wish you were coming with me," he said suddenly.

"It wouldn't take me long to pack," I answered.

He shook his head and smiled. "No," he said, "I was joking. We can't both be away for months at a time. It's a responsibility, you know, being a landowner."

"I could travel with you down to Rome," I said, excited at the idea. "I'd still be home by Christmas."

"No," he said slowly, "no, it was just a whim. Forget it."

He got up from his chair and went over to the window. He drew back the heavy curtains and stood for a few moments staring out across the grass. It was a quiet, still evening. The jackdaws had gone to roost, and for once even the owls were silent.

"I'm glad we did away with the paths and brought the turf close to the house," he said. "It would look better still if the grass went sloping right to the end by the pony's paddock. One day you must cut away the undergrowth to give a view of the sea."

"How do you mean," I said, "I must do it? Why not you?"

He did not answer at once. "Same thing," he said at last, "same thing. It makes no odds. Remember, though."

"Ambrose," I said, "Ambrose, let me come with you."

"Don't be a damn fool, Philip. Go to bed," he answered.

That was all. We did not discuss the matter any more. Next morning at breakfast he gave me some last instructions about the spring planting and various things he had in mind for me to do before his return. It was a raw, damp morning. Wellington brought the carriage to the door. The horses were restless and

eager to be off. Ambrose turned to me and laid his hand upon my shoulder. "Take care of things," he said, "don't fail me."

"That's a hit below the belt," I answered. "I've never failed you."

"You're very young," he said. "I put a great deal on your shoulders. Anyway, everything I have is yours; you know that."

I believe then if I had pressed the matter he would have let me go with him. But I said nothing. Seecombe and I put him in the carriage, and he smiled at us from the open window.

"All right, Wellington," he said, "drive on."

And they went away down the drive just as the rain began.

The weeks passed much as they had done during the two previous winters. I missed him as I always did, but there was plenty to occupy me. If I wished for company I rode over to visit my godfather, Nick Kendall, whose only daughter, Louise, was a few years younger than myself and a playmate from childhood days. She was a staunch girl, with no fancy ways, and pretty enough. Ambrose used to jest at times and say she would make me a wife one day, but I confess I never thought of her as such.

It was mid-November when his first letter came, brought back in the same vessel that had landed him at Marseilles. He was well and in good spirits, and looked forward to the journey into Italy. The next letter came from Florence. I kept all his letters, and I have them before me now. How often I read them during the next months; they were thumbed, and turned, and read again. It was towards the close of this first letter from Florence, where he had spent Christmas, that he first spoke of cousin Rachel.

"I have made the acquaintance of a connection of ours," he wrote. "You have heard me talk about the Coryns, who used to have a place on the Tamar, now sold up and changed to other hands. A Coryn married an Ashley two generations ago. A descendant of that branch was born and brought up in Italy by an impecunious father and an Italian mother, and married off at an early age to an Italian nobleman called Sangalletti, who departed this life by fighting a duel, it appears, leaving his wife with a load of debts and a great empty villa. No children. The Contessa

Sangalletti, or, as she insists on calling herself, my cousin Rachel, is a sensible woman and good company, and has taken it upon her shoulders to show me the gardens in Florence."

The next letter consisted almost entirely of lists of gardens, which seemed to have made a great impression upon Ambrose. So had our relative.

"I am beginning to have a real regard for our cousin Rachel," wrote Ambrose in early spring, "and feel quite distressed to think what she must have suffered from that fellow Sangalletti. She is just as English as you or I in her ways and outlook, and might have been living beside the Tamar yesterday. She is extremely intelligent but, thank the Lord, knows when to hold her tongue. None of that endless yattering so common in women. She has found me excellent rooms in Fiesole, not far from her own villa, and as the weather becomes milder I shall spend a good deal of my time at her place, sitting on the terrace or pottering in the gardens, which are famous for their design and for the statuary. How she exists I hardly know, but I gather she had to sell much valuable stuff in the villa to pay off the husband's debts."

I asked Nick Kendall if he remembered the Coryns. He did, and had not much opinion of them. "They were a feckless lot," he said. "Gambled away their money and estates. This woman's father must have been Alexander Coryn—I believe he did disappear to the Continent. Don't know what happened to him though. Does Ambrose give this *contessa's* age?"

"No," I said, "he only told me she had been married very young, but he did not say how long ago. I suppose she is middle-aged."

"She must be very charming for Mr. Ashley to notice her," remarked Louise. "I have never heard him admire a woman yet."

"That's probably the secret," I said. "She's plain and homely, and he doesn't feel forced to pay her compliments. I'm delighted."

One or two more letters came, scrappy, without much news. He was just back from dining with our cousin Rachel, or on his way there to dinner. He said how few people there were in Florence among her friends who could really give her disinterested

advice on her affairs. He flattered himself, he said, that he could do this. And she was so very grateful. In spite of her many interests, she seemed strangely lonely. She could never have had anything in common with Sangalletti and confessed she had been hungry all her life for English friends. "I feel I have accomplished something," he said, "besides acquiring hundreds of new plants to bring back home with me."

Then came a space of time. He had said nothing of the date of his return, but it was usually towards the end of April.

Shortly after Easter his letter came. "Dear boy," he said, "you will wonder at my silence. The truth is, I never thought I should one day write such a letter to you. Providence works in strange ways. You have always been so close to me that possibly you have guessed something of the turmoil that has been going on in my mind during the past weeks. Turmoil is the wrong word. Perhaps I should say happy bewilderment, turning to certainty. I have made no quick decision. As you know, I am too much a man of habit to change my way of living for a whim. But I knew, some few weeks back, that no other course was possible. I had found something I had never found before and did not think existed. My thoughts have gone to you very often, but somehow I have not felt calm and steady enough to write until today. You must know that your cousin Rachel and I were married a fortnight ago. We are now together in Naples on our honeymoon and intend returning to Florence shortly. Further than that I cannot say. We have made no plans, and neither of us has any wish at the present time to live beyond the moment.

"One day, Philip, not too far distant, I hope, you will know her. I could write much of personal description that would weary you, and of her goodness, too, her real and loving tenderness. These things you will see for yourself.

"Break the news to everyone, give them all my blessings and hers, too, and remember, my dearest boy and pup, that this marriage, late in life, cannot belittle one jot my deep affection for you; rather it will increase it, and now that I think of myself as the happiest of men I shall endeavour to do more for you than

ever before, and will have her to help me. Write soon, and if you can bring yourself to do so add a word of welcome to your cousin Rachel.

"Always, your devoted Ambrose."

The letter came about half past five, just after I had dined. Luckily, I was alone. I put the letter in my pocket and walked out across the fields down to the sea. I climbed over the rocks to a narrow ledge jutting into the little bay, where I used to swim in summer. I sat down and, taking the letter from my pocket, read it again. If I could have felt one spark of sympathy, of gladness, one single ray of warmth towards those two who were sharing happiness together down in Naples, it would have eased my conscience. Ashamed of myself, bitterly angry at my selfishness, I could raise no feeling in my heart at all. I sat there, numb with misery, staring at the flat calm sea. I had just turned twenty-three, and yet I felt as lonely and as lost as I had done years before, sitting on a bench in fourth form at Harrow, with no one to befriend me and nothing before me, only a new world of strange experience that I did not want.

CHAPTER 3



I THINK what shamed me most was the delight of his friends, their real pleasure and true thought for his welfare. Congratulations were showered upon me, as a sort of messenger to Ambrose, and in the midst of it all I had to smile and make out that I had known it would happen all along. "The best thing that could have happened." How often I heard the words

and had to echo them. There was much speculation upon the looks, the age, the general appearance of his bride, to which I would reply, "She is a widow, and she shares his love for gardens."

Very suitable, the heads would nod, the very thing for Ambrose. Then would follow jocularities, and jesting at the breaking in of

a confirmed bachelor to wedlock. That shrew, Mrs. Pascoe, the vicar's lady, ground away upon this subject as if by doing so she won revenge for Ambrose's past insults upon the holy state.

"What a change there will be now, Mr. Ashley," she said on every possible occasion. "No more go-as-you-please for *your* household. Some organization will at last be brought to bear upon the servants, and I don't imagine Seecombe being too well pleased. He has had things his own way long enough."

In this she spoke the truth. I think Seecombe was my one ally, but I was careful not to side with him, and stopped him when he tried to feel his way with me. But he continued to go about the place with a long face and never let an opportunity pass without making some sad allusion to the future. His gloom amused me, but when much the same thing was foretold by others—among them Louise Kendall—the remarks brought irritation.

"Thank goodness you will have fresh covers in the library," she said gaily. "They have gone quite grey with age and wear, but I dare say you never noticed it. And flowers in the house, what an improvement! The drawing-room will come into its own at last. I always thought it a waste that it was not used. Mrs. Ashley will furnish it, no doubt, with books and pictures from her villa."

She ran on and on, going over in her mind a whole list of improvements, until I lost patience with her and said roughly, "For heaven's sake, Louise, leave the subject alone. I'm sick of it."

She stopped short then and looked at me shrewdly.

"You aren't jealous, are you, by any chance?" she said.

"Don't be a fool," I told her.

It was an ugly thing to call her, but we knew each other so well that I thought of her as a younger sister and had small respect for her. It was her father, Nick Kendall, who made the final thrust, unaware, of course, that he was doing so.

"Have you made any plans for the future, Philip?" he said to me one evening after I had ridden over to take dinner with them.

"Plans, sir? No," I said, uncertain of his meaning.

"Early yet, of course," he answered, "but I wondered whether you had considered looking around the neighbourhood for some

small property of your own."

I was slow to grasp his meaning. "Why should I do that?" I asked.

"Well, the position is somewhat changed, isn't it?" he said in matter-of-fact tones. "Ambrose and his wife will want most naturally to be together. And if there should be a family, a son, things won't be the same for you, will they? I am certain Ambrose won't let you suffer from the change and will buy you any property you fancy."

My heart was too full to answer him. What he suggested was so new and unexpected that I could barely think straight and shortly afterwards made an excuse to go. Jealous, yes. Louise was right about that, I supposed. The jealousy of a child who must suddenly share the one person in his life with a stranger.

Hitherto, when I had thought of my cousin Rachel I had pictured a woman resembling Mrs. Pascoe, only more so. Large-featured and angular, with a hawk's eyes for dust, and far too loud a laugh when there was company for dinner, so that one winced for Ambrose. Now she took on new proportions. One moment monstrous, and the next pale and drawn, with an invalidish petulance about her. One moment middle-aged and forceful, next simpering and younger than Louise, my cousin Rachel had a dozen personalities or more, and each more hateful than the last. I saw her forcing Ambrose to his knees to play at bears, the children astride his back, and Ambrose consenting with a humble grace, having lost all dignity. Yet again, decked out in muslin, with a ribbon in her hair, I saw her pout and toss her curls, a curving mass of affectation, while Ambrose sat back in his chair surveying her, the bland smile of an idiot on his face.

When in mid-May a letter came, saying that they had decided to remain abroad throughout the summer, my relief was so intense that I could have shouted aloud. I felt more traitorous than ever, but I could not help it.

"Your cousin Rachel is still so bothered by the tangle of business that must be settled before coming to England," wrote Ambrose, "that we have decided to defer our return home for the

present. I do the best I can, but Italian law is one thing and ours another, and it's the deuce of a job to reconcile the two. I seem to be spending a mint of money, but I don't begrudge it. We talk of you often, dear boy, and I wish you could be with us."

Disappointment was, of course, intense throughout the neighbourhood that they would not be home this summer.

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Pascoe with a meaning smile, "Mrs. Ashley's state of health forbids her travelling?"

"As to that, I cannot say," I answered. "Ambrose mentioned in his letter that they had spent a week in Venice, and both of them came back with rheumatism."

Her face fell. "Rheumatism? His wife also?" she said. "How very unfortunate." And then: "She must be older than I thought."

My spirits rose. I took to singing once again when I went riding, swam before breakfast, sailed Ambrose's little boat about the estuary. At twenty-three it takes very little to make the spirits soar. My home was still my home. No one had taken it from me.

Then, in the winter, the tone of Ambrose's letters changed. At first, I scarcely noticed it, yet on re-reading his words I became aware of a sense of strain in all he said. Nostalgia for home in part, but above all a kind of loneliness that struck me as strange in a man but ten months married. "I was never one for headaches," he said, "but now I have them frequently. Almost blinding at times. I am sick of the sight of the sun. I miss you more than I can say. So much to talk about, difficult in a letter. My wife is in town today, hence my opportunity to write." It was the first time that he had used the words "my wife." Always before he had said "Rachel" or "your cousin Rachel," and the words "my wife" looked formal to me, and cold. In these winter letters there was no talk of coming home, but always a passionate desire to know the news, and he would comment upon any little trifle I had told him in my letters, as though he held no other interest.

Nothing came at Easter, or at Whitsun, and I grew worried. I told my godfather, who said no doubt the weather was holding up the mails. Late snow was reported in Europe, and I could not expect to hear from Florence before the end of May. It was over a

year now since Ambrose had been married, eighteen months since he had been home. My first relief at his absence, after his marriage, turned to anxiety that he would not return at all. At last, in July, a letter came, short and incoherent, totally unlike himself. Even his writing, usually so clear, sprawled across the page as if he had had difficulty in holding his pen.

"All is not well with me," he said; "you must have seen that when I wrote you last. Better keep silent though. She watches me all the time. I have written to you several times, but there is no one I can trust, and unless I can get out myself to mail the letters they may not reach you. Since my illness I have not been able to go far. As for the doctors, I have no belief in any of them. The new one, recommended by Rainaldi, is a cut-throat, but then he would be, coming from that quarter. However, they have taken on a dangerous proposition with me, and I will beat them yet." Then there was a gap, and something scratched out which I could not decipher, followed by his signature.

I had the groom saddle my horse and rode over to my godfather to show him the letter. He was as much concerned as I was myself. "Sounds like a mental breakdown," he said at once. "I don't like it at all. That's not the letter of a man in his right senses. I hope to heaven——" He broke off and pursed his lips.

"Hope what?" I asked.

"Ambrose's father died of a tumour on the brain. You know that, don't you?" he said shortly.

I had never heard it before, and told him so.

"Before you were born, of course," he said. "It was never a matter much discussed in the family. Whether these things are hereditary or not I can't say, nor can the doctors. Medical science isn't far enough advanced." He read the letter again, putting on his spectacles to do so. "I think," he said, "you had better make up your mind to go to Italy."

"That," I remarked, "I had already decided upon."

There was no vessel sailing from Plymouth that would help me. I was obliged to travel up to London, thence to Dover, catch the packet to Boulogne, and then cross France into Italy. Granted

no delay, I should be in Florence within three weeks or so. I bade farewell to Seecombe and the servants, telling them only that I intended paying a hurried visit to their master but saying nothing of his illness, and so set forth on a fine morning in July.

As the carriage turned on to the Bodmin road I saw the groom riding towards us with the post-bag. I told Wellington to rein the horses, and the boy handed me the bag. The chance was one in a thousand that there would be a further letter from Ambrose, but it so happened that the chance was there. I took an envelope from the bag and sent the boy on home. As Wellington whipped up the horses I drew out the scrap of paper and held it to the window for light. The words were scrawled, almost illegible.

"For God's sake, come to me quickly. She has done for me at last, Rachel my torment. If you delay, it may be too late. Ambrose."

That was all. There was no date upon the paper, no mark upon the envelope, which was sealed with his own ring. I sat in the carriage, the scrap of paper in my hand, knowing that no power on heaven or earth could bring me to him before mid-August.

CHAPTER 4

WHEN the conveyance brought me and the other passengers to Florence and dumped us down at the hostelry beside the Arno, I felt I had been a lifetime upon the road.

My first instinct on climbing from the coach, as the dusty baggage was unloaded and carried within the hostelry, was to cross the cobbled street and stand beside the river. I was travel-stained and weary, covered from head to foot with dust. For the past two days I had sat beside the driver rather than die from suffocation within—and, like the poor beasts upon the road, I longed for water. There it was before me. Not the blue estuary of home, rippling and salty-fresh, whipped with sea spray, but a slow-moving turgid stream, brown like the river bed beneath it, oozing and sucking its way under the arches of the bridge.

I stood watching the moving water, fascinated, and the sun beat down upon the bridge, and suddenly a great bell chimed four

o'clock, deep-sounding, solemn. The chime was taken up by other bells from other churches, and the sound mingled with the surging river as it passed, brown and slimy, over the stones.

Later I mounted to the room they had showed me, and changed my clothes with a strange apathy. Now that I had reached my journey's end a dullness came upon me, and the self which had set forth upon his journey, excited and ready for battle, existed no longer. In his place a stranger stood, dispirited and weary. Even the reality of the torn scrap of paper in my pocket had lost substance.

I went downstairs, and out into the square. I hailed a passing *carrozza*, and when I said doubtfully "Villa Sangalletti" the driver answered something which I could not understand, but I caught the word "Fiesole" as he nodded and pointed with his whip. We drove through the narrow, crowded streets, and he shouted to the horse, the reins jingling, the people falling back from us as we passed among them.

We climbed a long twisting road towards the distant hills, and Florence lay behind us. It was peaceful, silent, and the hot, staring sun that had beaten down upon the city all day turned gentle suddenly, and soft. The driver drew up his *carrozza* before a closed gate set in a long high wall. He turned in his seat and looked at me. "Villa Sangalletti," he said. The end of my journey.

I made signs to him to wait and, getting out, walked up to the gate and pulled at the bell that hung there. There was no sound from within the gate, and I rang again. This time there was a muffled barking of a dog, becoming louder as some door was opened; the fretful cry of a child was hushed shrilly, with irritation, by a woman's voice, and I could hear footsteps approaching the gate from the other side. There was a dragging sound of bolts being withdrawn, and then the grind of the gate itself as it scraped the stone beneath and was opened. A peasant woman stood peering at me. Advancing upon her, I said: "Signor Ashley?"

An avenue stretched in front of me, and at the far end I could see the villa itself, shuttered and lifeless. The woman made as though to shut the gate against me but I pushed past her, and

repeated the words "Signor Ashley." This time she started, as though for the first time she saw my features, and began to talk rapidly, with a sort of nervous agitation, gesturing with her hands towards the villa. Then she turned swiftly and called over her shoulder towards the gatekeeper's lodge. A man, presumably her husband, appeared at the open door, a child on his shoulder. He looked a better type than the woman, cleaner, with honest eyes, and as he stared at me an expression of deep concern came upon his face and he murmured a few words to his wife, who withdrew with the child to the entrance of the lodge.

"I speak a little English, *signore*," he said. "Can I help you?"

"I have come to see Mr. Ashley," I said. "Are he and Mrs. Ashley at the villa?"

The concern on his face became greater. He swallowed nervously. "You are Mr. Ashley's son, *signore*?" he said.

"No," I said impatiently, "his cousin. Are they at home?"

He shook his head, distressed. "You have come from England, then, *signore*, and have not heard the news? It is very sad; I do not know what to say. Signor Ashley, he died three weeks ago. Very sudden. Very sad. As soon as he is buried, the *contessa*, she shut up the villa, she went away. Nearly two weeks she has been gone. We do not know if she will come back again."

I felt all the colour drain away from my face. I stood there, stunned. The man watched me in sympathy and said something to his wife, who dragged forward a stool.

"Sit, *signore*," he said. "I am sorry. So very sorry."

I shook my head. I could not speak. There was nothing I could say. The man, distressed, spoke roughly to his wife to relieve his feelings. Then he turned again to me. "*Signore*," he said, "if you would like to go to the villa I will open it for you. You can see where the Signor Ashley died." I did not care where I went or what I did. My mind was still too numbed to concentrate. He began to walk up the drive, and I walked beside him, my legs heavy suddenly, like lead. The woman and the child followed behind us.

The cypress trees closed in upon us, and the shuttered villa, like

a sepulchre, waited at the farther end. As we drew closer I saw that it was large, with many windows, all of them blank and closed, and before the entrance the drive swept in a circle, for carriages to turn. Statues on their pedestals stood between the shrouded cypresses. The man opened the huge door with his key and motioned me inside. The woman and the child came, too, and the pair of them began to fling open the shutters, letting the daylight into the silent hall. The rooms all led into each other, large and sparse, with frescoed ceilings and stone floors, and the air was heavy with a medieval musty smell. In some of the rooms the walls were plain, in others tapestried, and in one, darker and more oppressive than the rest, there was a long refectory table flanked with carved monastic chairs.

"The Villa Sangalletti very beautiful, *signore*, very old," said the man. "The Signor Ashley, this is where he would sit when the sun was too strong for him outside. This was his chair."

He pointed, almost with reverence, to a tall high-backed chair beside the table. I watched him in a dream. None of this held reality. I could not see Ambrose in this house, or in this room. He could never have walked here with familiar tread, whistling, talking, throwing his stick down beside this chair, this table. Relentlessly, monotonously, the pair went round the room, throwing wide the shutters. Outside was a little court open to the sky but shaded from the sun. In the centre of the court stood a fountain and the bronze statue of a boy holding a shell in his two hands. Beyond the fountain a laburnum tree grew between the paving stones, making its own canopy of shade. The golden flowers had long since drooped and died, and now the pods lay scattered on the ground, dusty and grey. The woman went to a corner of the court and turned a handle. Slowly, gently, the water trickled from the shell between the bronze boy's hands. It fell down and splashed into the pool beneath.

"The Signor Ashley," said the man, "he sat here every day, watching the fountain. He liked to see the water. He sat there under the tree. It is very beautiful in spring. The *contessa*, she would call down to him from her room above."



He pointed to the stone columns of the balustrade. The woman disappeared within the house, and after a moment or two appeared on the balcony where he had pointed, throwing open the shutters of the room. The water went on dripping from the shell. Never fast, never flowing, just splashing softly into the little pool.

"In summer, always they sit here," went on the man. "They take their meals, they hear the fountain play, they take their *tisana* here after dinner, day after day, always the same."

He paused and touched the chair with his hand. A sense of oppression grew upon me. It was cool in the court, cold almost as a grave, and yet the air was stagnant like the shuttered rooms before he opened them. "Do you wish to see the room where the *signora* died?" he said softly.

Possessed with the same sense of unreality, I followed him up the wide stairway to the landing above. We passed through rooms more sparsely furnished than the apartments below, and one, looking northward over the avenue of cypress trees, was plain

and bare like a monk's cell. A simple iron bedstead was pushed against the wall. There was a pitcher, a ewer, and a screen beside the bed. Tapestries hung over the fireplace, and in a niche in the wall was the small statuette of a kneeling Madonna.

I looked at the bed. The blankets were folded neatly at the foot. Two pillows, stripped of their linen, were placed on top of one another at the head.

"The end," said the man in a hushed voice, "was very sudden, you understand. He was very weak from the fever, but even the day before he had dragged himself down to sit by the fountain. No, no, said the *contessa*, you will become more ill, you must rest, but he is very obstinate, he will not listen to her. And there is coming and going all the time with the doctors. Signor Rainaldi, he is here, too, talking, persuading, but never will Signor Ashley listen, he shouts, he is violent, and then, like a little child, falls silent. It was pitiful to see a strong man so. Then, in the early morning, the *contessa*, she comes quickly to my room, calling for me. I was sleeping in the house, *signore*. She says, her face white as the wall there, 'He is dying, Giuseppe, I know it, he is dying,' and I follow her to his room, and there he is, lying in bed, his eyes closed, breathing still, but heavily, you understand, not a true sleep. We send away for the doctor, but the Signor Ashley, he never wakes again; it was the coma, the sleep of death. I myself lit the candles with the *contessa*, and when the nuns had been I came to look at him. The violence had all gone, he had a peaceful face. I wish you could have seen it, *signore*."

"What do you mean," I said, "by violence?"

"The violence that came with the fever," said the man. "Twice, three times I had to hold him down in bed after his attacks. And with the violence came the weakness, here." He pressed his hand against his stomach. "He suffered much with pain. And when the pain went he would be dazed and heavy, his mind wandering. I tell you, *signore*, it was pitiful to see so large a man helpless."

I turned away from that bare room, and heard the man close the door. "Why was nothing done?" I said. "The doctors, could they not ease the pain? Did Mrs. Ashley just let him die?"

He looked puzzled. "Please, *signore*?" he said.

"What was his illness? How long did it last?" I asked.

"I have told you, at the end, very sudden," said the man, "but one, two attacks before then. And all winter the *signore* not so well, sad somehow, not himself. Very different from the year before. When the Signor Ashley first came, he was happy, gay."

We walked outside on to a great terrace, spaced here and there with statues. At the far end ran a long stone balustrade. We crossed the terrace and stood looking down upon a lower garden, clipped and formal, from which the scent of roses came, and summer jasmine, and in the distance was another fountain, and yet another, wide stone steps leading to each garden, tier upon tier, until at the far end came that same high wall flanked with cypress trees, surrounding the whole property.

We looked westward towards the setting sun, and there was a glow upon the terrace and the hushed gardens; even the statues were held in the rose-coloured light, and it seemed that a strange serenity had come upon the place that was not there before.

"I think," said the man slowly, "that the *contessa* will not come back again. Too sad for her. Too many memories. Signor Rainaldi told us that the villa is to be let, possibly sold."

His words jerked me back into reality. "Who is Signor Rainaldi?" I asked.

"The Signor Rainaldi, he arrange all things for the *contessa*," he answered, "matters of business, matters of money, many things."

"I want to see him—Signor Rainaldi," I said.

"I give you his address," he answered. "He speak English very well."

We went back into the villa, and as I passed through the rooms to the hall the shutters were closed, one by one, behind me. I felt in my pockets for some money. I might have been anyone, a casual traveller upon the Continent, visiting a villa from curiosity with a view to purchase. Not myself. Not looking for the first and last time on the place where Ambrose had lived and died.

"Thank you for all you did for Mr. Ashley," I said, putting the coins into the fellow's hand.

Once again the tears came into his eyes. "I am so sorry, *signore*," he said, "so very sorry."

The last shutters were closed. The woman and the child stood beside us in the hall, and the archway to the empty rooms beyond and to the stairway grew dark again, like the entrance to a vault.

"What happened to his clothes," I asked, "his belongings, his books, his papers?"

The man looked troubled. He turned to his wife, and they spoke to one another for a moment.

"*Signore*," said the man, "my wife says the *contessa* took everything. All the Signor Ashley's clothes were put in a big trunk, all his books; everything was packed. Nothing left behind."

I looked into both their eyes. They did not falter. I knew they were speaking the truth. "And you have no idea," I asked, "where Mrs. Ashley went?"

"She has left Florence, that is all we know," he said. "The day after the funeral the *contessa* went away."

He opened the heavy front door and I stepped outside.

"Where is he buried?" I asked, impersonal, a stranger.

"In Florence, *signore*, in the new Protestant cemetery. Many English buried there. Signor Ashley, he is not alone."

It was as if he wished to reassure me that Ambrose would have company, and that in the dark world beyond the grave his own countrymen would bring him consolation.

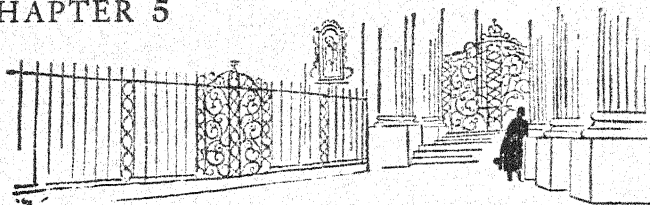
For the first time I could not bear to meet the fellow's eyes. I turned away, and as I did so I heard the woman exclaim suddenly to her husband, and before he had time to shut the door she had darted back into the villa once again and opened a great oak chest that was standing against the wall. She came back carrying something in her hand which she gave to her husband, and he in turn to me. His puckered face relaxed, broadening to relief.

"The *contessa*," he said, "one thing she has forgotten. Take it with you, *signore*, it is for you alone."

It was Ambrose's hat, wide-brimmed and bent. The hat that he used to wear at home against the sun. It would never fit any

other man, it was too big. I could feel their anxious eyes upon me, waiting for me to say something as I turned the hat over and over in my hands.

CHAPTER 5



I REMEMBER nothing of the return drive to Florence except that the sun had set and it grew quickly dark.

I paid off my driver in the piazza by the cathedral, and the sound of the great bell, compelling, insistent, rang like a challenge in the still and vapid air. Scarcely aware of what I did, I passed into the cathedral with the people.

I still held Ambrose's hat in my left hand, and as I stood there in the great cathedral, dwarfed into insignificance, a stranger in that city of cold beauty, I realized suddenly and sharply the full measure of my loss. Ambrose was dead. He was gone from me forever. Never more that smile, that chuckle, those hands upon my shoulder. Never more his strength, his understanding. I thought of the bare room where he had died in the Villa Sangal-letti, and of the Madonna in her niche; and something told me that when he went he was not part of that room, or of that house, or of this country, but that his spirit went back where it belonged, to be among his own hills and his own woods, in the garden that he loved, within sound of the sea.

I turned and went out of the cathedral and on to the piazza. The good servant at the villa had written down Signor Rainaldi's address for me, and after one or two inquiries, pointing at the piece of paper and struggling lamely with the pronunciation, I came at last to the house and rang the bell. A servant opened the door within a moment and, without inquiring my name, led

me upstairs and along a passage and, knocking upon a door, showed me into a room. I stood blinking at the sudden light, and saw a man seated in a chair beside a table, looking through a pile of papers. He rose as I came into the room and stared at me. He was a little less than my own height and of some forty years perhaps, with a pale, almost colourless face and lean, aquiline features. There was something proud, disdainful about his cast of countenance, but I think I noticed most his eyes, dark and deep-set, which at first sight of me startled into a flash of recognition that in one second vanished.

"Signor Rainaldi?" I said. "My name is Ashley. Philip Ashley."

"Yes," he said. "Will you sit down?"

His voice had a cold, hard quality, and his Italian accent was not strongly marked. He pushed forward a chair for me.

"You are surprised to see me, no doubt?" I said, watching him carefully. "You were not aware I was in Florence?"

"No," he answered. "No, I was not aware that you were here."

The words were guarded, but it may have been that his command of English was small, so that he spoke carefully.

"I have been to the Villa Sangalletti," I said. "I have seen the room where my cousin died. The servant Giuseppe was very helpful. He gave me all the details but referred me to you."

Was it my fancy, or did a veiled look come over those dark eyes? "How long have you been in Florence?" he asked.

"A few hours. Since afternoon."

"You have only arrived today? Then your cousin Rachel has not seen you."

"No," I said, "the servant at the villa gave me to understand that she had left Florence the day after the funeral."

"She left the villa," he said. "She did not leave Florence."

"Is she still here in the city?"

"No," he said, "no, she has now gone away. She wishes me to let the villa. Sell it, possibly." His manner was oddly stiff and unbending, as if any information that he gave me must be considered first and sorted in his mind.

"Do you know where she is now?" I asked.

"I am afraid not," he said. "She left very suddenly; she had made no plans. She told me she would write when she had come to some decision about the future."

I had the feeling that only today, or even yesterday, she had been in this room, that he knew more than he admitted.

"You will understand, Signor Rainaldi," I said, "that this sudden hearing of my cousin's death, from the lips of servants, was a very great shock. The whole thing has been a nightmare. What happened? Why was I not informed that he was ill?"

He did not take his eyes from my face. "Your cousin's death was sudden, too," he said; "it was a great shock to us all. He had been ill, but not, as we thought, dangerously so. The usual fever that attacks many foreigners here in summer had brought about a certain weakness, and he complained, too, of a violent headache. The *contessa*—I should say Mrs. Ashley—was much concerned, but he was not an easy patient. He took an instant dislike to our doctors. Yet every day Mrs. Ashley hoped for some improvement, and certainly she had no desire to make you anxious."

"But I was anxious," I said. "That was why I came to Florence. I received these letters from him." It was a bold move, perhaps, and reckless, but I did not care. I handed across the table the two last letters Ambrose had written me. He read them carefully. His expression did not change. Then he passed them back.

"Yes," he said, his voice quite calm, without surprise, "Mrs. Ashley feared he might have written something of the sort. It was not until those last weeks, when he became so secretive and strange, that the doctors feared the worst and warned her."

"Warned her?" I said. "Warned her of what?"

"That there might be something pressing on his brain," he answered, "a tumour, or growth, of rapidly increasing size."

A lost feeling came over me. A tumour? Then my godfather's surmise was right after all. First Uncle Philip, and then Ambrose. And yet . . . Why did this Italian watch my eyes?

"Did the doctors say that it was a tumour that killed him?"

"Unquestionably," he answered. "There were two doctors

present. I can send for them, and you can ask any question you care to put. One speaks a little English."

"No," I said slowly, "no, it is not necessary."

He opened a drawer and pulled out a piece of paper.

"I have here a copy of the certificate of death," he said, "signed by them both. Read it. One copy has already been posted to you in Cornwall, and a second to the trustee of your cousin's will, Mr. Nicholas Kendall."

I looked down at the certificate. I did not bother to read it.

"How did you know," I asked, "that Nicholas Kendall is trustee to my cousin's will?"

"Because your cousin Ambrose had a copy of the will with him," replied Signor Rainaldi. "I read it many times."

"You read my cousin's will?" I asked, incredulous.

"Naturally," he replied. "As trustee myself to the *contessa*, to Mrs. Ashley, it was my business to see her husband's will. Your cousin showed me the will himself soon after they were married. I have a copy of it, in fact. But it is not my business to show it to you. It is the business of your guardian, Mr. Kendall."

He knew my godfather was my guardian, which was more than I did. Unless he spoke in error. Surely no man past twenty-one possessed a guardian, and I was twenty-four. This did not matter, though. What mattered was Ambrose and his illness, Ambrose and his death.

"These two letters," I said stubbornly, "are not the letters of a sick man, of a person ill. They are the letters of a man who has enemies, who is surrounded by people he cannot trust."

Signor Rainaldi watched me steadily.

"They are the letters of a man who was sick in mind, Mr. Ashley," he answered me. "Forgive my bluntness, but I saw him those last weeks, and you did not. The experience was not a pleasant one for any of us, least of all for his wife. She did not leave him night or day. Another woman would have had nuns to tend him. She nursed him alone; she spared herself nothing."

"Yet it did not help him," I said. "Look at the letters, and this

last line, 'She has done for me at last, Rachel my torment. . . .'
What do you make of that, Signor Rainaldi?"

I suppose I had raised my voice. He went over to the side of the room where books lined the wall and took down a volume.

"Are you a student of medical history, Mr. Ashley?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"You will find it here," he said, "the sort of information you are seeking. There is a particular affliction of the brain, present above all when there is a growth, or tumour, when the sufferer becomes troubled by delusions. He fancies, for instance, that he is being watched. That the person nearest to him, such as a wife, has either turned against him, or is unfaithful, or seeks to take his money. No amount of love or persuasion can allay this suspicion, once it takes hold. If you don't believe me or the doctors here, ask your own countrymen or read this book."

How plausible he was, how confident. Whether he was right or wrong I did not know. All I knew was that I hated Rainaldi.

I rose from my chair and went towards the door. Rainaldi pulled the bell, and the servant came to show me out.

"I have written," he said, "to your guardian, Mr. Kendall. I have explained to him very fully, in great detail, everything that has happened. Is there anything more I can do for you?"

"When Mrs. Ashley returns," I said slowly, "tell her that I came to Florence. That I saw where Ambrose died. You can tell her, too, about the letters Ambrose wrote to me."

He held out his hand to me, cold and hard like himself. "Your cousin Rachel is a woman of impulse," he said. "When she left Florence she took all her possessions with her. I very much fear that she will never return."

I went out into the dark street. The city slept. I was the only loiterer. Even the solemn bells were silent, and the only sound was the river sucking its way under the bridge. I stared down at the water, watching it surge and flow and lose itself in the darkness, and by the single flickering lantern light upon the bridge I saw the bubbles forming, frothy brown. Then, borne upon the current, stiff and slowly turning, with its four legs in the air, came

the body of a dog. It passed under the bridge and went its way. I made a vow there, to myself, beside the Arno.

I swore that, whatever it had cost Ambrose in pain and suffering before he died, I would return it, in full measure, upon the woman who had caused it. I did not believe Rainaldi's story. I believed in the truth of those two letters that I held in my right hand. The last Ambrose had ever written to me.

Someday, somehow, I would repay my cousin Rachel.

CHAPTER 6

I ARRIVED home the first week in September. The news had preceded me—the Italian had not lied when he told me he had written to Nick Kendall. My godfather had broken the news to the servants and to the tenants. Wellington was waiting for me at Bodmin with the carriage. The horses were decked in crêpe, as were Wellington and the groom, their faces long and solemn. I got into the carriage and let them drive me home.

It was strange how the emotion and the fatigue of the past weeks vanished at sight of the house. All sense of strain left me, and in spite of the long hours on the road I felt rested and at peace. It was afternoon, and the sun shone on the windows of the west wing, and on the grey walls, as the carriage passed through the second gate up the slope to the house. The dogs were there, waiting to greet me, and poor Seecombe, wearing a crêpe band on his arm like the rest of the servants, broke down when I wrung him by the hand.

"It's been so long, Mr. Philip," he said, "so very long. And how were we to know that you might not take the fever, too?"

He waited upon me while I dined, solicitous, anxious for my welfare, and I was thankful that he did not press me with questions about my journey or about his master's illness and death, but was full of the effect upon himself and the household; how the bells had tolled for a whole day, how the vicar had spoken. And all his words were punctuated with a new formality of address. I was "Mr." Philip. No longer "Master" Philip. I had

noticed the same with the coachman and the groom. It was unexpected, yet strangely warming to the heart.

When I had dined I went out across the fields where the men were harvesting. They ceased work at the sight of me, and I went and spoke to all of them. Old Billy Rowe, who had been tenant of the Barton ever since I could remember and had never called me anything but Master Philip, touched his forehead when I came up to him, and his wife and daughter dropped me a curtsy. "We've missed you, sir," he said. "It hasn't seemed right to start carrying the corn without you. We're glad you're home." A year ago I would have rolled up my sleeves like the rest of them and seized a fork, but something stayed me now, a realization that they would not think it fit.

"I'm glad to be home," I said. "Mr. Ashley's death has been a great sadness to me, and to you, too, but now we all have to carry on as he would have wished us to do."

I stayed a few moments talking, then called to the dogs and went my way. Back at home the house was in shadow now, only the weather-vane on the top of the clock tower catching a loose shaft of light. I walked slowly across the grass to the open door.

It came upon me strongly, and for the first time since I had learned of Ambrose's death, that everything I now saw and looked upon belonged to me. Those walls and windows, that roof, the bell that struck seven as I approached, the whole living entity of the house was mine, and mine alone. The grass beneath my feet, the trees surrounding me, the hills behind me, the meadows, the woods, even the men and women farming the land yonder, were all part of my inheritance; they all belonged.

It was a strange feeling. In a sense it made me humble, and at the same time oddly proud. I was aware of a sort of confidence and of a strength that I had not known before.

My godfather, Nick Kendall, came over the following day, bringing Louise with him. As there were no close relatives to summon, and only bequests to Seecombe and the other servants, Nick Kendall read the will alone to me in the library. In spite of the legal language, the business seemed straightforward. Rainaldi

had been right: Nick Kendall *was* appointed my guardian, because the estate did not become mine until I was twenty-five.

"It was a belief of Ambrose's," said my godfather, taking off his spectacles as he handed me the document to read for myself, "that no young man knows his own mind until he turns twenty-five. You might have grown up with a weakness for drink or gambling or women, and this twenty-five-year clause made a safeguard. 'It can't hurt Philip,' Ambrose always said, 'and will teach him caution.' In point of fact, it won't affect you, except that you will have to call upon me for money, for the estate and for your personal use, for a further seven months. Your birthday is in April, isn't it?"

"You should know," I said, "you were my sponsor."

"A funny little worm you were, too," he said with a smile, "staring with puzzled eyes at the parson. Ambrose was just down from Oxford. He pinched your nose to make you cry, shocking his aunt, your mother. Afterwards he challenged your poor father to a pulling race, and they rowed from the castle to Lostwithiel, getting drenched to the skin, the pair of them. Ever felt the lack of parents, Philip? It's been hard on you, I often think, without your mother."

"I don't know," I said. "I've never thought about it much. I never wanted anyone but Ambrose."

My godfather was silent. Then I told him of my visit to the villa and of my meeting with Rainaldi, and he showed me in turn the letter that the Italian had written him. It was much as I expected, giving in cold, stilted words his story of Ambrose's illness and death, of his own personal regret, and of the shock and grief to the widow, who was, according to Rainaldi, inconsolable.

"So inconsolable," I said to my godfather, "that the day after the funeral she goes off, like a thief, taking all Ambrose's possessions with her, except his old hat, which she forgot."

He coughed. "Surely," he said, "you don't begrudge her the books and clothes? Hang it all, Philip, it's all she has."

"How do you mean," I asked, "it's all she has?"

"Well, I've read the will to you," he answered. "It's the same

will that I drew up ten years ago. There is no provision in it for a wife. All this past year I rather expected word from him at some time or other, about a settlement at least. It's usual. But I suppose his absence abroad made him neglectful of such a necessity, and he kept hoping to return. Then his illness put a stop to any business. I am a little surprised that this Rainaldi, whom you seem so much to dislike, makes no mention of any claim on the part of Mrs. Ashley. It shows great delicacy on his part."

"Claim?" I said. "Good God, you talk of a claim when we know perfectly well she drove him to his death?"

"We don't know anything of the sort," returned my godfather, "and if that is the way you are going to talk about your cousin's widow, I don't care to listen."

"So you believe the story of the tumour?" I said.

"Naturally I believe it," he replied. "Here is the letter from Rainaldi, and the death certificate, signed by two doctors. I remember your Uncle Philip's death, which you do not. The symptoms were very similar. It is exactly what I feared when that letter came from Ambrose and you left for Florence."

I could have hit him, the old fool, for being so blind.

"You never saw the second letter," I said, "the note that came the morning I went away. Look at this."

I had it still. I kept it always in my breast pocket. I gave it to him. He put on his spectacles again and read it.

"I'm sorry, Philip," he said, "but even that poor heartbreak of a scribble cannot alter my opinion. You must face facts. You loved Ambrose, so did I. When he died I lost my greatest friend. I am as distressed as you when I think of his mental suffering, perhaps even more so, because I have seen it in another. The man we knew and admired and loved was not his true self before he died. He was mentally and physically sick, and not responsible for what he wrote or said."

"I don't believe it," I said. "I can't believe it."

"You mean you won't believe it," said my godfather, "in which case there is nothing more to be said. But for Ambrose's sake, and for the sake of everybody here who knew and loved him, I must

ask you not to spread your views to others. It would cause distress and pain to all of them, and if such a whisper ever got to his widow, wherever she may be, she would be well within her rights to bring a case against you for slander. If I were her man of business, as that Italian seems to be, I would not hesitate to do so."

I had never heard my godfather speak with such force. He was right in saying there was no more to be said on the subject. I had learned my lesson. I would not broach it again.

"Shall we call Louise?" I said pointedly. "You had both better stay and dine with me."

My godfather was silent during dinner. And after the meal, when he summoned Seecombe and the servants to tell them of the bequests, I went and sat with Louise in the drawing-room.

"My godfather is displeased with me," I said, and told her the story. "You know," she said when I had finished, "I think you are probably right. I dare say poor Mr. Ashley and his wife were not happy, and he was too proud to write and tell you so before he fell ill, and then perhaps they had a quarrel, and everything happened at once, and so he wrote you those letters. What did those servants say about her? Was she young?"

"I never asked," I said. "I don't see that it matters. The only thing that matters is that he did not trust her when he died."

She nodded. "That was terrible," she agreed. "He must have felt so lonely." My heart warmed to Louise. Perhaps it was because she was young, my own age, that she seemed to have so much more perception than her father. He was getting old, I thought to myself, losing his judgment. "You should have asked that Italian, Rainaldi, what she looked like," said Louise. "It would have been my first question. And didn't you tell me once her first husband was killed in a duel? You see, that speaks badly for her, too. She probably had several lovers."

This aspect of my cousin Rachel had not occurred to me. I only saw her as malevolent, like a spider. In spite of my hatred, I could not help smiling. "How like a girl," I said to Louise, "to picture lovers. Stilettoes in a shadowed doorway. Secret staircases. I ought to have taken you to Florence with me. You would have learned

much more than I did." She flushed deeply when I said this, and I thought how odd girls were; even Louise, whom I had known my whole life, failed to understand a joke.

At that moment my godfather came to find us, and I said no more. He seemed in better humour. No doubt Seecombe and Wellington and the others had been grateful for their little bequests and he, benignly, felt himself in part the author of them.

"Ride over and see me soon," I told Louise as I helped her into the dog-cart. "You're good for me. I like your company." And she flushed again, silly girl, glancing up at her father to see how he would take it.

I did not think to see my godfather again for at least a fortnight, what with the harvest and other things upon my hands, but scarcely a week had passed before his groom rode over one morning with a message from his master, asking me to go and see him; he had news for me.

I found him in his study, alone. He had a curious look upon his face, baffled, ill at ease. "Well," he said, "now something has got to be done, and you have to decide exactly what, and when. She has arrived by boat in Plymouth."

"Who has arrived?" I asked. But I think I knew.

He showed me a piece of paper in his hand.

"I have a letter here," he said, "from your cousin Rachel."

CHAPTER 7



HE GAVE me the letter. It was dated from a hostelry in Plymouth on the 13th of September.

DEAR MR. KENDALL,

When Ambrose spoke of you, as he so often did, I little thought my first communication with you would be fraught with so much sadness. I arrived in

Plymouth from Genoa this morning in a state of great distress and, alas, alone.

My dear one died in Florence on the 20th of July after a short illness but violent in its attack. Everything was done that could be done, but the best doctors I could summon were not able to save him. There was a recurrence of some fever that had seized him earlier in the spring, but the last was due to pressure on the brain, which the doctors think had lain dormant for some months. He lies in the Protestant cemetery in Florence, in a site chosen by myself, quiet, and a little apart from the other English graves, with trees surrounding it, which is what he would have wished. Of my personal sorrow and great emptiness I will say nothing; you do not know me, and I have no desire to inflict my grief upon you.

My first thought has been for Philip, whom Ambrose loved so dearly, and whose grief will be equal to my own. My good friend and counsellor, Signor Rainaldi of Florence, assured me he would write to you and break the news, so that you could tell Philip, but I have little faith in those mails from Italy to England and was fearful either that the news should come to you by hearsay, through a stranger, or that it would not come at all. Hence my arrival in this country. I have brought with me all Ambrose's possessions; his books, his clothes, everything that Philip would wish to have. If you will tell me what to do with them, and whether or not I should write to Philip myself, I shall be deeply grateful.

I left Florence very suddenly, on impulse and without regret. I could not bear to stay with Ambrose gone. As to further plans, I have none. After so great a shock time for reflection is, I think, most necessary. I believe I still have members of my own family, the Coryns, scattered about Cornwall, but knowing none of them, I have no wish to intrude upon them. I would much prefer to be alone. Possibly, after I have rested here a little, I may travel up to London and then make further plans.

I will await instruction from you what to do with my husband's possessions.

Most sincerely yours,
RACHEL ASHLEY

I read the letter once, twice, perhaps three times. My godfather waited for me to speak. I did not say a word.

"You see," he said at length, "that after all she has kept nothing."

I did not answer.

"She doesn't even ask to see the house," he went on, "the house that would have been her home had Ambrose lived. She may be pleasant or unpleasant—how can I tell? But the point is, she asks nothing, she demands nothing. Yet she is Mrs. Ashley. I'm sorry, Philip. I know your views. But as Ambrose's friend, I cannot sit here and do nothing when his widow arrives alone and friendless in this country. We have a guest-room here at Pelyn. She is welcome to it until her plans are formed."

I went and stood by the window. Louise had a basket on her arm and was snipping off the heads of the dead flowers in the border. I wondered if my godfather had read the letter to her.

"Well, Philip," he said, "I don't suppose you want to see her, and if she accepts my invitation I shall not ask you over whilst she is here. But some sort of message at least is due from you, an acknowledgment of the things she has brought back for you. I can put that in a postscript when I write."

I turned away from the window and looked back at him. "When you write to Plymouth," I said, "say that Philip Ashley has already heard the news of Ambrose's death. That he went to Florence on receipt of two letters, went to the Villa Sangalletti, saw her servants, saw Signor Rainaldi, and is now returned. Say that he is a plain man, that he has no fine manners, no conversation, and is little used to the society of women. If, however, she wishes to see him and her late husband's home—Philip Ashley's house is at the disposal of his cousin Rachel, when she cares to visit it." And I placed my hand upon my heart and bowed.

"I never thought," said my godfather slowly, "to see you grow so hard. What has happened to you?"

"Nothing," I said, "save that, like a young war-horse, I smell blood. Have you forgotten my father was a soldier?"

Then I went out into the garden to find Louise. Her concern at the news was greater than my own.

"Your house isn't fit to receive anyone," she said at once, "let alone a woman like the *contessa*—like Mrs. Ashley. Why, Philip, there hasn't been a woman staying there for twenty years. What

room will you put her in? And think of the dust! Not only upstairs but in the drawing-room, too, I noticed it last week."

I said impatiently, "She can dust the place herself, if she minds so much. The worse she finds it, the better pleased I shall be."

"Oh, but you're wrong," exclaimed Louise. "You don't want to seem a boor, an ignoramus. That would be putting yourself at a disadvantage before you even spoke to her. You must remember she has lived on the Continent all her life, has been used to great refinement, many servants. She will have heard so much about the house from Mr. Ashley that she will expect something very fine. And to have it all untidy, dusty, smelling like a kennel—why, you would not want her to find it so, Philip, for his sake."

Damn it, I was angry. "What the devil do you mean," I said, "by my house smelling like a kennel? It's a man's house, plain and homely, and please God it always will be."

She had the grace to look contrite, if not ashamed.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I did not mean to offend you. You know I love your house. I have a great affection for it and always will. But I can't help saying what I think as to the way it's kept. Nothing new for so long, no real warmth about it, and lacking—well, lacking comfort, if you'll forgive that, too."

"All right," I said, "forget my lack of comfort. It suited Ambrose, and it suits me, and for the space of a few days it can suit my cousin Rachel, too."

Louise shook her head. "Poor Seecombe! What I would give to see his face. She will throw things at him if he fails to come when she pulls her bell. Italians are very passionate, you know, very quick-tempered."

"She's only half Italian," I reminded her, "and I think Seecombe is well able to take care of himself. Perhaps it will rain for three days and she will be confined to bed with rheumatism." We laughed together like a pair of children.

When I went home I found, to my great surprise, that Seecombe received the idea without dismay. It was almost as if he had expected it. "Yes, sir," he said, "very right and very proper. We shall all be glad to welcome Mrs. Ashley."

I glanced at him over my pipe, amused at his pomposity. "I thought," I said, "you were like me and did not care for women in the house. You sang a different tune when I told you Mr. Ambrose had been married and she would be mistress here."

He looked shocked. "That was not the same, sir," he said. "There has been tragedy since then. The poor lady is widowed. Mr. Ambrose would have wished us to do what we can for her, especially as it seems"—he coughed discreetly—"that Mrs. Ashley has not benefited in any way from the decease."

I wondered how the devil he knew that, and asked him.

"It's common talk, sir," he said, "all around the place. Everything left to you, Mr. Philip, nothing to the widow. It is not usual, you see. In every family, big or small, there is always provision for the widow."

"I'm surprised at you," I said, "lending your ear to gossip."

"Not gossip, sir," he said with dignity; "what concerns the Ashley family concerns us all."

"That is all, Seecombe," I said. "I will let you know if Mrs. Ashley decides to visit us. I don't know about a room. I leave that side of the business to you."

"Why, surely, Mr. Philip, sir," said Seecombe in surprise, "it will be correct to put Mrs. Ashley into Mr. Ashley's own room?"

I stared at him, shocked into sudden silence. Then fearing my feelings showed in my face, I turned away.

"No," I said, "that won't be possible. I shall be moving into Mr. Ashley's room myself. I meant to tell you so before. I decided upon the change some days ago." It was a lie. I had not thought of such a thing until that moment.

"Very well, sir," he said, "in that case the blue room and the dressing-room will be more suitable for Mrs. Ashley." And he left the room.

The invitation was accepted. She wrote a letter back to my godfather, not to me. Which, as no doubt Seecombe would have thought, was duly right and proper. She would be ready, she said, whenever it was convenient. I replied, again through my godfather, that I would send the carriage for her on the Friday.

Friday came all too soon. A moody, fitful sort of day, with gusts of wind. The clouds were low, scudding across the sky from the south-west, threatening rain before the evening. I hoped it would rain. One of our true downpours, with maybe a gale thrown in for further measure. A west-country welcome. I had sent Wellington off with the horses the day before. He would stay overnight in Plymouth and return with her. Ever since I had told the servants that Mrs. Ashley was expected a sort of unrest had come upon the house. Even the dogs were aware of it and followed me about from room to room. Seecombe reminded me of some old priest who, after years of abstinence from any form of religious celebration, suddenly conforms again to forgotten ritual. He moved about, mysterious and solemn, with hushed footsteps, and bits of silver I had never seen before were borne into the dining-room and placed on the table or on the sideboard. Relics, I supposed, of my Uncle Philip's day. Great candlesticks, sugar casters, goblets, and a silver bowl filled—great Joshua—with roses placed as a centrepiece.

"I have asked Tamlyn to bring cut flowers from the walled garden," he said. "We shall need flowers in the drawing-room, and in the blue bedroom, in the dressing-room and boudoir."

The dogs gazed up at me, dejected. One of them crept and hid under the settle in the hall. I went upstairs. Heaven knows when last I had trespassed into the blue room. I had a dim recollection that Ambrose had once said it was Aunt Phœbe's room, and Aunt Phœbe had gone away to live in Kent and later died.

No trace of her remained today. The servants, under Seecombe's direction, had worked hard, and Aunt Phœbe had been swept away with the dust of years. The windows were open, and the morning sun shone on the well-beaten rugs. Fresh linen, of a quality unknown to me, had been put upon the bed.

The third room, under the arch, making up the suite, had been Aunt Phœbe's boudoir. This, too, had been dusted, and the windows opened. There was a portrait of Ambrose hanging on the wall above the fireplace, painted when he was a young man. I did not even know of its existence, and he had probably forgotten it.

It was painted three-quarter length, and he had his gun under his arm and carried a dead partridge in his left hand. The eyes looked ahead into my eyes, and the mouth smiled a little. There was nothing very striking in the portrait or in the face. Only one thing. It was strangely like myself. I looked in the mirror, and back again to the portrait, and the only difference lay in the slant of his eyes, and in his darker colouring of hair. We could be brothers, though, almost twin brothers. This sudden realization of our likeness gave an uplift to my spirits. It was as if the young Ambrose was smiling at me, saying, "I am with you." And the older Ambrose, too, felt very close.

I was out all morning and returned about two, hungry and thirsty after my ride, and had some cold meat and a glass of ale. Seecombe and the servants were in their own quarters, sitting down to their midday dinner. I stood alone in the library. Alone, I thought, for the last time. Tonight she would be here, either in this room or in the drawing-room, an unknown hostile presence, stamping her personality upon my rooms, my house. The house was still and silent, and I was part of it, belonging, as Ambrose had done and still did, somewhere in the shadows. We needed no one else to break the silence.

I looked about the room, almost in farewell, and then went out of the house and plunged into the woods.

I judged that Wellington would be home with the carriage not earlier than five o'clock, so I determined to remain without until after six. They could wait dinner for me. Seecombe already had his instructions. If she was hungry, she must hold her hunger until the master of the house returned. It gave me satisfaction to think of her sitting alone in the drawing-room, dressed to the nines, full of self-importance, and no one to receive her.

I went on walking in the wind and rain. Up the avenue to where the four roads met, and eastward to the boundary of our land; then back through the woods again and northward to the outlying farms, where I made a point of dallying and talking with the tenants. Across the park and over the westward hills, and home at last by the Barton, just as it grew dusk.

I opened the hall door and went into the house. I expected to see the signs of arrival, boxes and trunks, travel rugs and baskets; but all was as usual; there was nothing there. A fire was burning in the library, but the room was empty. In the dining-room a place was laid for one. I pulled the bell for Seecombe. "Well?" I said.

He wore his new-found look of self-importance, and his voice was hushed. "Madam has come," he said.

"So I would suppose," I answered. "It must be nearly seven. Did she bring luggage? What have you done with it?"

"Madam brought little of her own," he said. "The boxes and trunks belonged to Mr. Ambrose. They have all been put in your old room, sir."

"Oh," I said. I walked over to the fire and kicked a log. I would not have him notice for the world that my hands were trembling.

"Where is Mrs. Ashley now?" I said.

"Madam has gone to her room, sir," he said. "She seemed tired, and she asked you to excuse her from dinner. I had a tray taken up to her about an hour ago."

"Hm." I turned my back upon the fire and warmed my legs.

"You're very wet, sir," said Seecombe. "Better change your things or you'll take cold."

"I will directly," I answered him, and then, glancing about the room, "Where are the dogs?"

"I think they followed Madam upstairs," he said.

I went on warming my legs before the fire. "All right," I said, "I'll bath and change. Tell one of the boys to take up the hot water. And I'll dine in half an hour."

I sat down that evening alone to my dinner before the newly polished candlesticks and the silver rose bowl. Just as I finished, Seecombe came and bent over my shoulder.

"Madam has sent word that if you should wish to see her, when you have dined, she will be pleased to receive you," he said.

"Thank you, Seecombe."

CHAPTER 8

A low voice, almost inaudible, bade me come in. Although it was now dark and the candles had been lit, the curtains were not drawn, and she was sitting at the window looking out on to the garden. Her back was turned to me, her hands were clasped in her lap. Don lay before the fire, his muzzle in his paws and the two young dogs beside him. Nothing had been moved in the room, no drawers opened in the small *secrétaire*, no clothes flung down; there was none of the litter of arrival.

"Good evening," I said, and my voice sounded strained and unnatural in the little room. She turned and rose and came towards me. The woman who had pursued me through the nights and days, haunted my waking hours, disturbed my dreams, was now beside me. My first feeling was one of shock, almost of stupefaction, that she should be so small. She barely reached my shoulder.

She was dressed in deep black, which took the colour from her face, and there was lace at her throat and wrists. Her hair was brown, parted in the centre, with a low knot behind, her features regular. The only things large about her were the eyes, which at sight of me widened in sudden recognition, startled, like the eyes of a deer, and from recognition almost to apprehension.

I stared down at her and she looked up at me, and it was a moment before we spoke. When we did, it was to speak together.

"I hope you are rested," was my stiff contribution, and hers, "I owe you an apology." She followed up my opening swiftly with "Thank you, Philip, yes," and moving towards the fire, she sat down on a low stool beside it and motioned me to the chair opposite. Don, the old retriever, stretched and yawned and, pulling himself on to his haunches, placed his head upon her lap.

"I owe you an apology for not coming down to dinner," she said. "You had made so much preparation just for me, and must have come hurrying home long before you wanted. But I was very tired. I would have made a poor sort of companion. It seemed to me that it would be easier for you if you dined alone."

I thought of how I had tramped about the estate to keep her waiting, and I said nothing. One of the younger dogs woke up and licked my hand. I pulled his ears to give myself employment.

"Seecombe told me how busy you were and how much there is to do," she said. "I don't want you to feel hampered in any way by my visit. I can find my way about alone and shall be happy doing so. You mustn't make any sort of alteration in your day tomorrow because of me. I just want to say one thing, which is, thank you, Philip, for letting me come."

She rose then and crossed over to the window to draw the curtains, then came back beside the fire, and we both sat down again.

"It was such a strange feeling," she said, "driving through the park and up to the house, with Seecombe standing by the door to welcome me. I've done it so many times, you know, in fancy. Everything was just as I had imagined it. The hall, the library, the pictures on the walls. The clock struck four as the carriage drove up to the door; I even knew the sound of it." I went on pulling at the puppy's ears. I did not look at her.

Her manner was quite easy now. That first nervousness had gone, if it had been nervousness at all. "Wellington pointed out to me the entrance to Mr. Kendall's house," she said, "and for a moment I wondered if it would be right, and polite, to go and pay him my respects. But it was late, and the horses had been far, and very selfishly I was longing to be—here." She had paused a moment before saying the word "here," and it came to me that she had been on the point of saying "home" but checked herself. Then she said, "It was perceptive of you to let me have these rooms. They were the ones we meant to use had we been together. Ambrose always intended you to have his room, and Seecombe told me you had moved into it. Ambrose would be glad."

"I hope you'll be comfortable," I said. "Nobody seems to have been in here since someone called Aunt Phœbe."

"Aunt Phœbe fell lovesick of a curate and went away to Tonbridge to mend a broken heart," she said, "but the heart proved stubborn, and Aunt Phœbe took a chill that lasted twenty years. Did you never hear the story?"



"No," I said, and glanced across at her. She was looking into the fire, smiling, I suppose, at the thought of Aunt Phœbe. Her hands were clasped on her lap in front of her. I had never seen hands so small before on an adult person. They were very slender, very narrow, like the hands of someone in a portrait painted by an old master and left unfinished.

"Well," I said, "what happened to Aunt Phœbe?"

"The chill left her, after twenty years, at sight of another curate. But by then Aunt Phœbe was five-and-forty, and her heart was not so brittle. She married the second curate."

"Was the marriage a success?"

"No," said my cousin Rachel, "she died on her wedding night—of shock."

She turned and looked at me, her mouth twitching, yet her eyes still solemn, and suddenly I had a vision of Ambrose telling the story, as he must have done, hunched in his chair, his shoulders shaking, with her looking up at him in just this way, concealing laughter. I could not help myself. I smiled at Cousin Rachel, and something happened to her eyes and she smiled back.

"I think you made it up upon this instant," I said to her, instantly regretting my smile.

"I did nothing of the sort," she said. "Secombe will know the story. Ask him."

I shook my head. "He would not think it fitting. And he would be deeply shocked if he thought you had told it to me. I forgot to ask you if he brought you anything for dinner."

"Yes. A cup of soup, chicken, and devilled kidney. All excellent."

"You realize, of course, there are no women servants in the house? No one to look after you, to hang your gowns, only young John or Arthur to fill your bath?"

"I much prefer it. Women chatter so. As to my gowns, all mourning is the same. I have only brought this and one other. I have strong shoes for walking in the grounds."

"This rain will take off tomorrow, and you'll get your walk."

"'Bove Town and Bawden's meadow," she said, "Kemp's

Close and Beef Park, Kilmoor and the beacon fields, the Twenty Acres, and the west hills."

I looked at her, astonished. "You know the names of the Barton lands?" I said.

"Why, yes, I've known them by heart now for near two years."

I was silent. There seemed nothing I could say in answer. Then, "Can you ride?" I asked her.

"No."

"Could you sit upon a horse if you were led?"

"I might do that," she answered, "but I would have to hold on to the saddle with both hands. And isn't there something called a pommel on which one balances?"

She put the question with great earnestness, her eyes solemn, yet once more I was certain there was laughter hidden there and she wished to draw me. "I'm not sure," I said stiffly, "if we have a lady's saddle. I'll ask Wellington."

"Perhaps Aunt Phœbe used to ride," she said, "when she lost her curate. It may have been her only consolation."

It was useless. Something bubbled in her voice, and I was lost. She saw me laughing, that was the devil of it. I looked away.

At that moment Seecombe knocked upon the door and entered, bearing in his hands a silver kettle upon a monstrous tray, likewise a silver teapot and a canister. I had never set eyes upon the things before, and I wondered from what labyrinth in the steward's room he had come upon them. Not for the world would I hurt Seecombe, who placed his offering upon the table with great dignity, but a rising tide of something near hysteria rose in my chest, and I got up from my chair and went over to the window in pretence of looking out upon the rain.

"Tea is served, madam," said Seecombe.

"Thank you, Seecombe," she answered solemnly.

"What about breakfast, madam?" asked Seecombe. "Mr. Philip has his in the dining-room at eight o'clock."

"I would like mine in my room. Mr. Ashley used to say no woman was fit to look upon before eleven. Will that give trouble?"

"Certainly not, madam."

"Then thank you, Seecombe, and good night."

"Good night, madam. Good night, sir." There was silence in the room for a few moments after he left and then she said softly: "Would you like some tea? I understand it is a Cornish custom."

My dignity vanished. Holding to it had become too great a strain. I went back to the fire and sat on the stool beside the table.

"I'll tell you something," I said. "I have never seen this tray before, nor the kettle, nor the teapot."

"I didn't think you had," she said. "I saw the look in your eyes when Seecombe brought them into the room. I don't believe he has seen them before, either. They're buried treasure. He has dug for them in the cellars."

"Is it really the thing to do, to drink tea after dinner?"

"Of course," she said, "in high society, when ladies are present."

She drank her tea, watching me over her cup.

"If you want to smoke your pipe, you can," she said.

I stared at her, surprised. "In a lady's boudoir?" I said. "Are you sure? Why, on Sundays, when Mrs. Pascoe comes with the vicar, we never smoke in the drawing-room."

"It's not the drawing-room, and I'm not Mrs. Pascoe."

I shrugged my shoulders and felt in my pocket for my pipe.

"Seecombe will think it very wrong," I said. "He'll smell it in the morning."

"I'll open the window before I go to bed," she said. "It will all blow out, with the rain."

It struck me suddenly as I smoked my pipe, sitting there in Aunt Phœbe's boudoir, that this was not at all the way I had intended to spend the evening. I had planned a few words of icy courtesy and an abrupt farewell, leaving the interloper snubbed.

I glanced up at her. She had finished her tea and put the cup and saucer back on the tray. Once again I was aware of her hands, narrow and small and very white. She wore two rings, fine stones, both of them, yet they seemed to clash in no way with her mourning. I was glad I had the bowl of my pipe to hold and the stem to bite upon; it made me feel more like myself and less like a

sleepwalker muddled by a dream. If only she had borne some resemblance to the images I had created I should know better what to do, but now that she was here, beside me, in the flesh, the images seemed fantastic.

"Philip," said the voice, very quiet, very low, "Philip, you're nearly asleep. Will you please get up and go to bed?"

I opened my eyes with a jerk. She was sitting watching me, her hands in her lap. I stumbled to my feet and nearly crashed the tray. "I'm sorry," I said, "it must have been because I was sitting cramped there on that stool; it made me sleepy. I usually stretch my legs out in the library."

"You took a lot of exercise today, too, didn't you?" she said.

Her voice was innocent enough and yet . . . What did she mean? I frowned and stood staring down at her, determined to say nothing. "If it's fine then tomorrow morning," she said, "will you really find a horse for me that will be steady and quiet, so that I can go and see the Barton acres?"

"Yes," I said, "if you want to go."

"I needn't bother you; Wellington shall lead me."

"No, I can take you. I have nothing else to do."

"Stay here a moment," she said. "I have a present for you." She went into the blue bedroom opposite, and returned within a moment carrying a stick in her hand.

"Here," she said, "take it, it's yours. I wanted to give it to you myself, tonight."

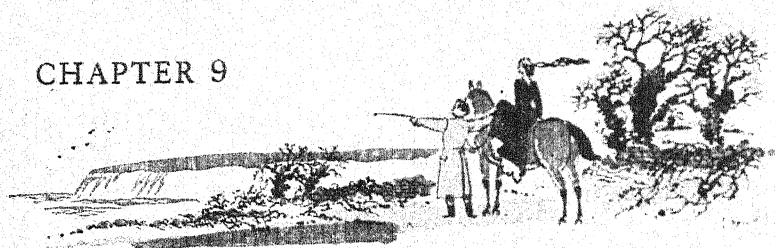
It was Ambrose's walking stick. The one he always used and leaned upon. The one with the gold band and the dog's head on the top carved in ivory. To my dismay her eyes grew bright suddenly, and wet.

"Thank you," I said awkwardly, "thank you very much."

"Now go," she said, "please go, quickly."

And she pushed me from the room and shut the door.

CHAPTER 9



I WAS down early the following morning, and after breakfast walked across to the stables and summoned Wellington. We went together to the harness room. Yes, there were some half-dozen side-saddles though I had never noticed them.

"Mrs. Ashley cannot ride," I told him. "All she wants is something to sit upon and to cling on to."

"We'd better put her up on Solomon," said the old coachman. "He may never have carried a lady, but he won't let her down, that's certain. I couldn't be sure, sir, of any of the other horses."

Solomon had been hunted years back by Ambrose, but now took his ease chiefly in the meadow, unless exercised on the high-road by Wellington.

"What time does the mistress wish to start?" he asked, and I stared at him a moment, taken aback by his choice of words.

"Some time after noon," I said shortly. "I shall be leading Mrs. Ashley myself."

Then I turned back to the estate room in the house to check the accounts before the men came for their wages. The mistress indeed. Was that how they looked upon her, Wellington and Seecombe and the rest? I supposed in a sense it was natural, yet I thought how swiftly men, especially men-servants, became fools in the presence of a woman. That look of reverence in Seecombe's eye when he had brought in the tea last night, and this morning at breakfast it was young John, if you please, who waited by the sideboard because "Mr. Seecombe," he said, "has gone upstairs with the tray for the boudoir." And now here was Wellington, in a state of excitement, polishing and rubbing at the old

side-saddle, and shouting over his shoulder to the boy to see to Solomon.

At noon the servants came, and the men who worked outside in the stables, woods and gardens, and I gave them their money; then I noticed that Tamlyn, the head gardener, was not among them. I was told that he was somewhere about the grounds with "the mistress." When I had paid the rest their wages, I found Tamlyn and my cousin Rachel in the forcing ground, where we had brought on the camellias and the other young trees that Ambrose had carried back from his travels.

As I rounded the corner and came upon them I could hear her talking about cuttings, and layers, and a north aspect, and the feeding of the soil, and Tamlyn listening to it all with his hat in his hand and the same look of reverence in the eye that See-combe had, and Wellington. She smiled at the sight of me and rose to her feet. She had been kneeling on a piece of sacking, examining the shoots of a young tree.

"I've been out since half past ten," she said. "I could not find you, so I did a bold thing and went down myself to Tamlyn's cottage to make myself known to him, didn't I, Tamlyn?"

"You did, ma'am," said Tamlyn with a sheep's look in his eye.

"You see, Philip," she continued, "I brought with me to Plymouth all the plants and shrubs that we had collected, Ambrose and I, during the past two years. I have the lists here with me, and where he wished them to go, and I thought it would save time if I talked over the list with Tamlyn. I may be gone when the carrier brings the load."

"That's all right," I said. "Please continue."

"We've finished, haven't we, Tamlyn?" she said. "And will you please thank Mrs. Tamlyn for the tea she gave me, and tell her that I do so hope her sore throat will be better by this evening? Oil of eucalyptus is the remedy. I will send some down to her."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Tamlyn, and, looking at me, he added with a little awkward air of diffidence, "I've learned some things this morning, Mr. Philip, sir, that I never thought to learn

from a lady. I always believed I knew my work, but Mrs. Ashley knows more about gardening than I do, or ever will."

"Nonsense, Tamlyn," said my cousin Rachel. "I only know about trees and shrubs. As to fruit—I haven't the least idea how to set about growing a peach, and remember, you haven't yet taken me round the walled garden. You shall do so tomorrow."

"Whenever you wish, ma'am," said Tamlyn, and she bade him good morning and we set back towards the house.

When we arrived I discovered that Seecombe had laid out a cold luncheon of meat and salad in the dining-room, complete with pies and puddings, as though we were to sit for dinner. My cousin Rachel glanced at me, her face quite solemn, yet that look of laughter behind her eyes.

"You are a young man and you have not finished growing," she said. "Eat and be thankful. Put a piece of that pie in your pocket, and I will ask you for it when we are on the west hills. I am going upstairs now to dress myself suitably for riding."

At least, I thought to myself as I tucked into the cold meat with hearty appetite, she does not expect waiting upon or other niceties; she has a certain independence of spirit that would seem, thank the Lord, unfeminine. I had scarcely finished eating when Solomon was brought round to the door. The sturdy old horse had undergone the grooming of his lifetime. Even his hoofs were polished, an attention never paid to my Gypsy.

I went to tell Seecombe we would be out till after four, and when I returned my cousin Rachel had come downstairs and was already mounted upon Solomon. Wellington was adjusting her stirrup. She had changed into another mourning gown, cut somewhat fuller than the other, and she had wound a black lace shawl about her hair. As she sat up on Solomon you could not tell that she was so small. The woman whom I considered unremarkable, save for her hands and her changing eyes and the bubble of laughter in her voice upon occasion, looked different now that she sat above me. She seemed more remote, and more—Italian.

She heard my footsteps and turned towards me; and it went

swiftly, the distant look, the foreign look, that had come upon her features in repose. She looked now as she had before.

"Ready?" I said. "Or are you fearful of falling?"

"I put my trust in you and Solomon," she answered.

"Very well, then. Come on. We shall be about two hours, Wellington." And taking the bridle, I set off with her to tour the Barton acres.

The Barton lands form a peninsula, the beacon fields forming the farther end of it and the sea running into bays, east and west, on either side. To make a thorough tour of it all we kept close to the sea and finally brought up by the beacon itself, so that, looking back, she could see the whole run of the estate.

Remembering her talk of the night before, I tried to test my cousin Rachel on the names of all the Barton fields but she knew them all. She knew the names of the tenants, the size of their families, that Seecombe's nephew lived in the fish house on the beach, and that his brother had the mill. She did not throw her information at me; it was rather I who led her on to disclose it, and when she gave me the names and spoke of the people, it was with something of wonder that I should think it strange.

"What do you suppose we talked of, Ambrose and I?" she said to me at last as we came down from the beacon hill to the eastward fields. "His home was his passion, therefore I made it mine."

"But I should have thought that, having lived on the Continent all your life," I said, "your interests would have been entirely different."

"So they were," she said, "until I met Ambrose."

"Except for gardens, I gather."

"Except for gardens," she agreed, "which was how it started. My garden at the villa was very lovely, but this"—she paused a moment, reining in Solomon—"but this is what I have always wanted to see. This is different." She said nothing for a moment or two as she looked down on the bay. "At the villa," she went on, "when I was young and first married—I am not referring to Ambrose—I was not very happy, so I distracted myself by

designing afresh the gardens there. The results were very pleasing. I wonder what you would think of them."

What did she mean? Had not my godfather told her I had been to the villa? A sudden misgiving came upon me. I remembered her composure of the night before, after the first nervousness on meeting, and also the easiness of our conversation. It struck me now that it was odd she had said nothing last night about my visit to Florence, odder still that she had made no reference to the manner in which I had learned of Ambrose's death. Could it be that my godfather had shirked that issue and left it to me to break it to her?

This was the moment, of course—the moment to say, "I have seen the gardens at your Villa Sangalletti. Didn't you know?" But she made a coaxing sound to Solomon and he moved on.

"Can we go past the mill and up through the woods the other side?" she asked.

I had lost my opportunity, and we went on back towards home. As we progressed through the woods she made remarks from time to time about the trees, or the set of the hills, or some other feature; but for me the ease of the afternoon had gone, for somehow or other I had to tell her about my visit to Florence. I became more and more silent as we drew towards the house.

"I've exhausted you," she said. "Here I have been riding like a queen on Solomon, and you walking all the while, pilgrim-fashion. Forgive me, Philip. I've been so very happy."

"No, I'm not tired," I said. Somehow I could not look into those eyes, direct and questioning.

At dinner Seecombe placed her on my right hand, and both he and John waited upon us. She admired the rose bowl and the candlesticks and talked to Seecombe as he handed the courses, and all the while I was in a sweat that he should say, "That happened, madam, or this occurred, when Mr. Philip was away in Italy."

I could hardly wait for us to be alone again, though it brought me nearer to my task. We sat down before the library fire, and she brought out some embroidery and began to work upon it.

"Tell me what it is that is bothering you," she said after a while.

"Ambrose used to tell me I had an animal's instinct for sensing trouble, and I sense it with you tonight. In fact, since late afternoon. I have not said anything to hurt you, have I?"

Well, here it was. At least she had opened a way clear for me.

"You've said nothing to hurt me," I replied, "but a chance remark of yours confounded me a little. Could you tell me what Nick Kendall said to you in the letter he wrote to Plymouth?"

"Why, certainly," she said. "He thanked me for my letter, he told me that both of you knew already the facts of Ambrose's death, that Signor Rainaldi had written to him, and that you invited me here for a short visit. Indeed he suggested that I should go on to Pelyn after leaving you."

"He said nothing about my having been away?"

"No."

"I see." I felt myself grow hot, and she went on sitting there so calm and still, working at the piece of embroidery.

Then I said, "My godfather was correct in telling you that he learned of Ambrose's death through Signor Rainaldi. But it was not so for me. You see, I learned of it in Florence, at the villa."

She lifted her head and looked at me; and this time there were no tears in her eyes, no hint of laughter either; the gaze was long and searching, and it seemed to me I read in her eyes both compassion and reproach.

CHAPTER 10

"**Y**ou went to Florence?" she said. "When? How long ago?"
"I have been home a little under three weeks," I said. "I went there and returned through France. I spent one night in Florence only. The night of the 15th of August."

"The 15th of August?" I saw her eyes flash back in memory. "But I had only left for Genoa the day before. It isn't possible."

"It is both possible and true," I said. "It happened."

The embroidery had fallen from her hands, and that strange look, almost of apprehension, came back into her eyes.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she said. "Why have you let me

stay here in the house four-and-twenty hours and never breathed a word of it? You should have told me last night.

"You went to the villa," she went on, as though talking to herself. "Giuseppe must have let you in. He would open up the gates and see you standing there, and he would think——" she broke off, a cloud came over her eyes; she looked away from me to the fire.

"I want you to tell me what happened, Philip," she said.

I put my hand in my pocket. I felt the letters there.

"I had not heard from Ambrose in a long while," I said, "not since before Easter—I grew worried. Then in July the letter came. Only a page. Unlike himself, a sort of scrawl. I showed it to my godfather, Nick Kendall, and he agreed that I should start at once for Florence. As I left another letter came, a few sentences only. Do you want to see these letters?"

"Not just yet," she said, "afterwards."

I shifted my gaze from her eyes down to her hands. It was easier to speak somehow if I did not look directly at her.

"When I arrived in Florence," I said, "I drove to your villa. The servant told me Ambrose was dead and you had gone away. I saw the room where he had died. Just before I left, his wife gave me Ambrose's hat. It was the only thing you had forgotten."

I paused, and went on looking at her hands. The right fingers were touching the ring on the left hand. I watched them tighten upon it.

"Go on," she said.

"The servant gave me the address of Signor Rainaldi. I went and called upon him. He gave me the particulars of Ambrose's illness and death. I inquired of your whereabouts, but he professed not to know. That was all. The following day I started back on my journey home."

There was another pause. The fingers relaxed their hold upon the ring. "May I see the letters?" she said.

I took them from my pocket and gave them to her. I looked at the fire, and I heard the crinkle of the paper as she opened the letters. There was a long silence. Then she said, "Only these two?"

"Only those two," I answered.

She must have been reading them over and over, learning the words by heart as I had done. At last she gave them back to me.

"How you have hated me," she said slowly.

Denial was no use, protestation absurd. The barriers were down. It was a queer feeling, as though I sat naked in my chair.

"Yes," I said. It was easier, once said. Perhaps, I thought to myself, this is how a Catholic feels in the confessional. This is what it means to be purged. A burden lifted. Emptiness instead.

"Why did you ask me here?" she said.

"To accuse you."

"Accuse me of what?"

"I am not sure. Perhaps of breaking his heart, which would be murder, wouldn't it?"

"And then?"

"I had not planned so far. I wanted, more than anything in the world, to make you suffer. To watch you suffer."

"That was generous. More generous than I should deserve. Still, you have been successful. You have got what you wanted. Go on watching me until you've had your fill."

I rose from my chair and walked across the room. Taking the two letters, I threw them into the fire.

"That's no use, when we both of us remember what he said."

"I can forget," I said, "if you will, too. There's something clean about a fire. Nothing remains. Ashes don't count."

"If you were a little older," she said, "or your life had been different, if you were anyone but yourself and had not loved him quite so much, I could talk to you about those letters and about Ambrose. I won't though; I would rather you condemned me. It makes it easier in the long run for both of us. If you will let me stay until Monday, I will go away after that, and you need never think about me again. Although you did not intend it to be so, last night and today were deeply happy. Bless you, Philip."

I stirred the fire with my foot, and the embers fell.

"I don't condemn you," I said. "Nothing has worked out as I

thought. I can't go on hating a woman who doesn't exist."

"But I do exist."

"You are not the woman I hated. There's no more to it than that."

Old Don, lying on the floor, lifted his head and leaned it against her knee. She stroked his head.

"This woman," she said, "that you pictured in your mind. Did she take shape when you read the letters, or before?"

I thought about it for a moment.

"Before," I said slowly. "In a sense I was relieved when the letters came. They gave me a reason for hating you. Up till then there was nothing I could go upon, and I was ashamed."

"You were jealous. . . ."

"Yes. I can say it now, oddly enough. Right from the start, when he wrote and told me he was married. It must sound absurd to you that I should have been jealous. Like a spoiled child. Perhaps that's what I was, and am. The trouble is that I have never known anyone or loved anyone in the world but Ambrose."

"Was not that his trouble, too?" she said.

"How do you mean?"

She took her hand off Don's head and, cupping her chin in her hands, her elbows on her knees, she stared into the fire.

"He was forty-three," she said, "when he came out to Florence just two years ago and I saw him for the first time. You know how he looked, how he spoke, his ways, his smile. But you would not know the effect he had upon a woman whose life had not been happy, who had known men—very different."

I said nothing, but I think I understood.

"I don't know why he turned to me, but he did," she said. "Those things can never be explained; they happen. To me, lonely, anxious, and a survivor of too many emotional shipwrecks, he came almost as a saviour, as an answer to prayer. To be strong as he was, and tender, too, lacking all personal conceit—I had not met with that. It was a revelation. I know what he was to me. But I to him. . . ."

She paused and frowned into the fire.

"He was like someone sleeping who woke suddenly and found the world," she said, "all the beauty of it, and the sadness, too. The hunger and the thirst. Everything he had never thought about or known was there before him, and magnified itself into one person who by chance or fate—call it what you will—happened to be me. Rainaldi—whom he detested—told me once that Ambrose had awakened to me just as some men wake to religion. But a man who gets religion can go into a monastery and pray all day before a statue of Our Lady. She is made of plaster, and does not change. Women are not so, Philip. Their moods vary with the days and nights, sometimes even with the hours, just as a man's can do. We are human, that is our failing."

"You mean," I said, "that he expected too much of you? He put you on a sort of pedestal?"

"No," she said, "I would have welcomed a pedestal, after my rough life. A halo can be a lovely thing, providing you can take it off now and again and become human."

"What then?"

She sighed, and her hands dropped to her sides. She suddenly looked very tired.

"Finding religion does not always improve a person," she said. "Waking to the world did not help Ambrose. His nature changed."

Her voice sounded tired, too, and oddly flat. Perhaps if I had been speaking in the confessional, so had she.

"Change?" I said. "How did his nature change?" I felt a queer sort of shock in my heart, like the shock that comes to you as a child when you suddenly learn of death, or of evil.

"The doctors told me later that it was his illness," she said, "that he could not help himself, that qualities lying dormant all his life came to the surface at long last, through pain and fear. But I shall never be sure. Never be certain that it need have happened. Something in me brought out those qualities. Finding me was ecstasy to him for one brief moment, and then catastrophe. You were right to hate me. If he had not come to Italy, he would have been living here with you now."

I felt ashamed, embarrassed. I did not know what to say. "He might have become ill just the same," I said, as though to help her. "Then I would have borne the brunt of it, not you."

She looked across at me and smiled.

She straightened her gown and sat upright in her chair. "I would say that, for this night, I have talked to you enough," she said. She bent forward and picked up the piece of embroidery that had fallen to the floor.

"I'm not tired," I said. "I could go on longer, much longer. That is to say, not speaking perhaps myself, but listening to you."

"We still have tomorrow," she said.

"Why only tomorrow?"

"Because I go on Monday. I came for the week-end only. Your godfather has invited me to Pelyn."

It seemed to me absurd, and altogether pointless, that she should shift her quarters quite so soon.

"There's no need to go there," I said, "when you have only just arrived. You have plenty of time to visit Pelyn. You have not seen the half of this yet. The servants and people on the estate would be deeply offended."

"Would they?" she asked.

"Besides," I said, "there is the carrier coming from Plymouth with all the plants and cuttings. You have to discuss it with Tamlyn. And there are Ambrose's things to go through and sort."

"I thought you could do that by yourself," she said.

"Why?" I said. "When we could do it both of us together."

I stood up from my chair and stretched my arms above my head. I glanced down at her, and she was looking up at me with such a strange expression in her eyes, almost as though she saw right through me into someone else.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Nothing," she answered, "nothing at all. . . . Can you find me a candle, Philip, and light me up to bed?"

"Very well," I said.

The candlesticks were waiting on the table by the door. She

took hers, and I lighted the candle for her. It was dark in the hall, but above, on the landing, Seecombe had left a light to the farther corridor.

"That will do," she said. "I can find my way alone."

She stood a moment on one step of the staircase, her face in the shadow. One hand held the candlestick, the other held her dress.

"You don't hate me any more?" she asked.

"No," I said, "I told you it was not you. It was another woman."

"Good night, then. And sleep well."

Suddenly she bent and kissed my cheek.

"The first you have ever had," she said, "and if you don't like it, you can pretend that it came from the other woman."

She walked up the stairs away from me, and the light of the moving candle threw a shadow, dark and distant, on the wall.

CHAPTER 11



WE ALWAYS carried out a strict routine upon a Sunday. Breakfast was later, at nine o'clock, and at a quarter past ten the carriage came to take Ambrose and me to church. The servants followed in the wagonette. At four we dined, with the vicar and Mrs. Pascoe, possibly their two unmarried daughters, and generally my godfather and Louise.

This Sunday, in honour of my visitor, I gave orders for the carriage to come as of old custom, and my cousin Rachel descended to the hall upon the stroke of ten. A kind of ease had come upon me since the night before, and it seemed to me, as I looked upon her, that I could in future say to her what I pleased.

"A word of warning," I said after I had wished her a good morning. "All eyes will be upon you in the church. People will be standing in the aisles, maybe on tiptoe."

"You terrify me," she said. "I shall not go at all."

"That would be disgrace," I said, "for which neither you nor I would ever be forgiven."

The carriage came to the door. Wellington, with brushed hat and trim cockade, the groom beside him swollen with importance like a pouter pigeon. I handed my cousin Rachel into the carriage and took my place beside her. She had a dark mantle around her shoulders, and the veil from her hat concealed her face.

"The people will want to see your face," I said to her.

"I will lift my veil in church, but not before," she said, "when I am kneeling. They can look then, if they have the mind, but their eyes should be on their prayer books."

"A high bench surrounds the pew, with curtains to it," I told her. "Once you're kneeling there, you will be concealed from view. You can even play marbles if you want to. I used to, as a child."

"You will behave yourself today, or I shall walk out of the church," she said to me.

"Then everyone would think you had the vapours," I said, "and my godfather and Louise would come rushing to your assistance. Oh, great heaven——" I broke off, and clapped my hand on my knee in consternation.

"What's the matter?"

"I've only just remembered. I promised to ride over yesterday to Pelyn to see Louise, and I forgot all about it. She may have waited for me all afternoon."

"That," said my cousin Rachel, "was not very gallant of you."

"I shall blame it upon you," I said, "which will be the truth. I shall say you demanded to be taken round the Barton."

I looked at her and laughed, and I saw the eyes smile back at me under the veil.

We had descended the steep hill and turned along the lane and were now come to the church. As I had thought, there was a gathering of people by the rails. As we alighted, I took off my hat and offered my cousin Rachel my arm. We walked up the path to the church door, the people staring at us. I had expected to feel myself a fool and out of my own character, but it was quite

otherwise. I felt confident and proud, and oddly pleased. I stared straight ahead of me, and, as we passed, the men took their hats off to us and the women curtsied. I could not remember them doing this to me alone. It was, after all, a great occasion.

It was a queer sensation, having a woman in the pew beside me. I was aware of her all the time. She sat very still, her eyes fixed gravely upon the vicar, and when she knelt I noticed that she knelt full upon her knees, and did not sit half upon the seat as Ambrose and I had been wont to do. When we came to sing the hymns she put up her veil, and I saw her lips follow the words, but I did not hear her sing. She lowered the veil again when we sat down to listen to the sermon.

"And now to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost." The vicar's words brought me to my feet. I had not heard a word of his sermon. I had sat there dreaming and watching my cousin Rachel. I reached for my hat and touched her arm. "You did well," I whispered, "but your real ordeal is now before you."

"Thank you," she whispered back, "so is yours. You have to make amends to Louise for your broken promise."

We went out of the church into the sun, and there, waiting for us, was a little crowd of people, tenants, acquaintances and friends, and among them Mrs. Pascoe, the vicar's wife, and her daughters, as well as my godfather and Louise. One by one they came up to be presented. We might have been at Court.

As we walked down the path to the waiting carriages she said to me before the others, so that I could not remonstrate, "Philip, would you not like to conduct Miss Kendall in your carriage, and I will go with Mr. Kendall in his?"

"Why, certainly, if you prefer it," I said.

"That seems to me a very happy arrangement," she said, smiling at my godfather. They turned with one accord to the Kendall carriage, and there was nothing for it but to climb into the first one with Louise. I felt like a schoolboy who has been slapped.

"Look here, Louise, I'm sorry," I began at once. "It was quite impossible to get away yesterday afternoon after all. My cousin

Rachel wished to see the Barton acres, so I accompanied her. There was no time to let you know."

"Oh, don't apologize," she said. "I waited about two hours, but it did not matter."

"It was most unfortunate," I said. "I'm really very sorry."

"I guessed something of the sort had kept you," she said, "but I am thankful it was nothing serious. I know how you felt about the whole visit, and I was rather fearful that you might do something violent, and we would suddenly find her arriving on our doorstep. Well, what happened? Tell me all."

I tilted my hat over my eyes and folded my arms.

"All? What do you mean by 'all'?"

"Why, everything. What did you say to her, how did she take it? Was she very much aghast at all you said?"

Her voice was low, and Wellington could not hear, but for all that I felt irritated. What a place and time to choose for such a conversation, and anyway, why must she catechize me at all?

"We've had little time for talking," I said. "The first evening she was tired and went early to bed. Yesterday was taken up by walking about the place."

Louise was silent. She did not lean back against the carriage seat as I did. She sat bolt upright, her hands in her muff.

"She's very beautiful," she said at last, "even if she is middle-aged. Quite thirty-five, I should say. Or do you think her less?"

"I haven't the remotest idea, nor do I care, Louise. I'm not interested in people's ages. She could be ninety-nine for all I know."

"Don't be ridiculous. Women don't have eyes like that at ninety-nine, nor that complexion. She dresses well. That gown was excellently cut, so was the mantle. Mourning does not appear drab on her."

"Great heavens, Louise, you might be Mrs. Pascoe. I've never before in my life heard such womanish gossip come from you."

I was thankful the long hill had come so that I could get out of the carriage and walk up it with the groom to ease the horses, as was our custom. What an extraordinary attitude for Louise to take. Instead of being relieved that my cousin Rachel's visit was

passing off so well, she appeared quite put out. When we came to the top of the hill I climbed in again and sat beside her, and we did not say a word to one another the whole way.

When we descended from our carriage Louise and I stood by the door and waited for my godfather and my cousin Rachel. They were chattering like old friends, and my godfather, generally rather taciturn, was holding forth with unusual warmth.

"Did you have a pleasant drive?" inquired my cousin Rachel, searching my eyes, a tremor at her mouth, and I could swear she knew from our stiff faces how the drive had been.

"Thank you, yes," said Louise, standing back, allowing her to pass first, in courtesy; but my cousin Rachel took her arm and said, "Come with me to my room, and take off your coat and hat."

My godfather and I had barely had time to exchange greetings before the Pascoe family was upon us, and it devolved upon me to escort the vicar and his daughters round the gardens. As to the vicar's wife, Mrs. Pascoe, she had gone upstairs to join the ladies like a hound after quarry. The daughters were loud in praise of my cousin Rachel and, like Louise, professed to find her beautiful. It delighted me to tell them that I found her small and entirely unremarkable, and they uttered little squeals of protestation. "Not unremarkable," said Mr. Pascoe, "certainly not unremarkable. Nor would I say, as the girls do, beautiful. But feminine, that is the word, most decidedly feminine."

Not since Ambrose had been home two years before had I ever known a Sunday to pass as swiftly. And even when he was there it had dragged many times. This day was different.

Dinner, when it was served, with the meats upon the table and the silver polished, seemed to spread itself before us like a banquet. I sat at the head of the table, where Ambrose had always sat, and my cousin Rachel at the farther end. The vicar, drawn out of his shell for possibly the first time in his life, flushed and with eyes afire, proceeded to quote poetry. The Pascoe family blossomed, and I had never seen my godfather enjoy himself so much.

Only Louise seemed silent and withdrawn. I did my best with



her, but she did not, or would not, respond. Well, if she wanted to sulk, then sulk she must. I was too much entertained myself to worry with her. I sat hunched in my chair, laughing at my cousin Rachel, who kept encouraging the vicar with his verse. This, I thought to myself, is the most fantastic Sunday dinner I have ever sat through, and I would have given the whole world for Ambrose to be there, sharing it with us. When we had finished dessert and the port was put upon the table, I did not know whether I should rise, as I usually did, to open the door, or if, now I had a hostess opposite me, it would be her place to give some signal. Suddenly she looked at me and smiled. I smiled back at her in answer. We seemed to hold each other for a moment. It was queer, strange. The feeling went right through me, never before known.

Then my godfather remarked in his gruff deep voice, "Tell me, Mrs. Ashley, does not Philip remind you very much of Ambrose?"

There was a moment's silence. She put down her napkin on the table. "So much so," she said, "that I have wondered, sitting here at dinner, if there is any difference."

She rose to her feet, the other women, too, and I went across the dining-room and opened the door. But when they were gone and I had returned to my chair, the feeling was with me still.

CHAPTER 12

THEY ALL went off about six o'clock, as the vicar had to take evensong in another parish. I heard Mrs. Pascoe engage my cousin Rachel to pass an afternoon with her during the week, and the Pascoe daughters pressed their claims upon her, too. One wanted advice upon a water colour, the other had a set of covers to be worked in tapestry and could not decide upon the wools. "Indeed," said Mrs. Pascoe, "there are so many people who desire to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Ashley, that I think you can reckon upon engagements every afternoon for the next four weeks."

"She can do that very well from Pelyn," said my godfather. "We are situated handily for visiting. And I rather believe we are to have the pleasure of her company within a day or two."

He glanced at me, and I made haste to squash the idea.

"Not so, sir," I said. "My cousin Rachel remains here for the present. She has the whole of the estate to visit. Great offence will be given if she does not pay her respects to every one of the tenants in strict precedence."

I saw Louise look at me wide-eyed, but I took no notice.

"Oh, well, yes, of course," said my godfather, in his turn surprised, "very right, very proper. But if," he went on, turning to my cousin Rachel, "if you would like a woman's company, I know my daughter will be only too ready to receive you."

"We have a guest-room at the vicarage," said Mrs. Pascoe. "If at any time you should be lonely, Mrs. Ashley, always remember it is at your disposal. We should be so happy to have you with us."

"You are all very kind and generous," said my cousin Rachel. "When I have done my duty here, on the estate, we will talk about it again, shall we? Meanwhile, believe me grateful."

There was much clatter and chatter and saying of good-byes, and the carriages drove away down the drive. We went back into the drawing-room. The evening had passed pleasantly enough, heaven knows, but I was glad that they had gone.

"Sit down and fill your pipe," she said. "Have you enjoyed yourself?"

"I have." I lay sideways, sprawling on a stool. "I don't know why," I added. "Usually I find Sundays a great bore. It's because I'm not a conversationalist. All I had to do today was to sit back in my chair and let you do the talking for me."

"That's where a woman can be useful," she said. "It's part of her training."

"Yes, but you don't make it obvious," I said. "I can't think what it is you did to make it all so pleasant."

"You had better hurry up and marry your Louise and have a real hostess, not just a bird of passage."

I sat up on the stool and stared at her. She was smoothing her hair before the mirror.

"Marry Louise?" I said. "Don't be absurd. I don't want to marry anyone. And she isn't 'my' Louise."

"Oh!" said my cousin Rachel. "I rather thought she was. At least your godfather gave me that impression."

She sat down on one of the chairs and took up her embroidery. I was fuming. "What did my godfather say?" I asked.

"I don't remember, specifically," she said. "I just think he felt it was an understood thing. He mentioned that it had been such a handicap for you, brought up in a household of men; the sooner you married and had a wife to look after you, the better. He said Louise understood you very well, as you did her. I hope you apologized for your bad manners on Saturday."

"Yes, I apologized," I said, "but it did not seem to make much difference. It's all nonsense about Louise anyway, so please forget it. I have never considered her as a wife and don't intend to."

"Poor Louise," she murmured.

"And another thing you can forget about is this nonsense of visiting everybody," I continued, "staying at the vicarage, staying at Pelyn. What is wrong with this house and with my company?"

"Nothing, as yet."

"Well, then . . ."

"I will stay until Seecombe becomes tired of me."

"Seecombe has nothing to do with it," I said, "nor Wellington, nor Tamlyn, nor any one at all. I am the master here."

"Then I must do as I am bid," she answered. "That is part of a woman's training, too."

I glanced at her suspiciously to see if she was laughing, but she was looking at her work and I could not see her eyes.

"Tomorrow," I said, "I shall draw up a list of the tenants in order of seniority. The ones who have served the family longest will be the first to be visited. We will set forth at two o'clock every afternoon until there is not a single individual on the estate that you have not met."

"Yes, Philip."

"When we have finished with our own people, you will have to stay in the house three afternoons a week—Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays—in case you are called upon by the County."

"I see. And when the County have finished calling upon me, she said, "what happens then?"

"Why, then you are obliged to return their calls, every single one of them. I will order the carriage every afternoon for two o'clock. I beg your pardon. Not every afternoon. But every Tuesday, Thursday and Friday."

"And what do I have to do on Mondays and on Wednesdays?"

"On Mondays and on Wednesdays, let me see . . ." I considered rapidly, invention failing me. "Do you sketch at all, or sing? Like the Misses Pascoe?"

"I neither sketch nor sing," said my cousin Rachel, "and I am afraid you are drawing up a programme of leisure for which I am entirely unsuited. If, instead of waiting for the County to call upon me, I call upon them for the purpose of giving them lessons in Italian, that would suit me much better."

She rose to her feet, having snuffed the candles in the tall stand beside her. I stood up from my stool.

"Mrs. Ashley give lessons in Italian?" I said in mock horror.

"What a disgrace upon the name. Only spinsters give lessons when they have no one to support them."

"And what do widows do who find themselves in similar circumstances?" she asked.

"Widows?" I said, not thinking. "Oh, widows marry again as fast as possible, or sell their rings."

"I see. Well, I intend doing neither. I prefer giving lessons in Italian." She patted me on the shoulder and left the room, calling good night over her shoulder. I felt myself go scarlet. Good God, what had I said? I had spoken without a thought of her condition, forgetting who she was and what had happened. What in heaven's name could she have thought of me?

I remembered what that man Rainaldi had said, that she was obliged to sell the villa in Florence. I realized, with the full force of its application, that in Ambrose's will he had left her nothing, nothing at all. What in the world would people think if Mrs. Ashley went about giving lessons in Italian?

Two days ago, three days ago, I would not have cared. She

could have starved, that other woman of my fancy, and deserved it. But not now. The whole situation had entirely changed. Something would have to be done about it, and I did not know what. Then, with a sensation of relief, I suddenly remembered that the money and the property were not yet legally mine, and would not become so until my birthday in six months' time. Therefore, it was the responsibility of my godfather. It was for him to approach my cousin Rachel and make some sort of provision for her out of the estate. I would go to see him about it at the first opportunity.

It was not possible to ride over to Pelyn in the early part of the week because of the programme I had drawn up for visiting the tenants. On Thursday my opportunity arrived and I was on the road to Pelyn by ten o'clock. I found my godfather in his study, and without any preamble I broached the subject of my visit.

"So you understand," I said to him, "something will have to be done, and right away. Why, if it should reach Mrs. Pascoe's ears that Mrs. Ashley considers giving lessons in Italian it would be about the county in twenty-four hours."

My godfather, as I had expected, looked most shocked and pained. "Oh, disgraceful," he agreed, "quite out of the question. It would never do at all. The matter is a delicate one, of course. I must have time to think this out, how to approach the business."

"We have no time to waste," I said. "You don't know my cousin Rachel as well as I do. She is quite capable of saying to one of the tenants in her easy way, 'Do you know of anyone who would like to learn Italian?' And where should we be then? We must do something for her, and today."

My godfather sorted his papers spread upon the desk. "Well, then," he said, "I will write a letter to Mrs. Ashley and to the bank. I will explain what the estate is prepared to do. The best plan will be to pay a quarterly cheque from the estate into an account which I will open for her. In six months' time, when you become twenty-five, you will be able to handle the business yourself. Now, as to the sum of money every quarter. What do you suggest?"

I thought a moment and named a figure.

"That is generous, Philip," he said. "Rather overgenerous. She will hardly need as much as that. Not for the moment, at least."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, don't let's be niggardly," I said. "If we do this thing, let us do it as Ambrose would have done it or not at all."

"Well, she should be pleased by this," he said. "It should atone for any disappointment with the will."

I stood over him while he wrote his letter, so that I could be certain what he said to her. He did not mention my name. He talked of the estate. It was the wish of the estate that provision should be made for her. The estate had decided upon the sum to be paid quarterly.

"If you do not wish to seem mixed up in the affair," he said to me, "you had better not take the letter. Dobson has to go your way this afternoon. He can take the letter for me."

"Excellent," I said, "and I will go to the bank. Thank you."

"Don't forget to see Louise before you go," he said. "I think she is somewhere in the house."

I could have done without Louise in my impatience to be off, but I could not say so. She was in the parlour, as it happened, and I was obliged to pass the open door from my godfather's study.

"I thought I heard your voice," she said. "Have you come to spend the day? Let me give you some cake and fruit."

"I have to go at once," I said, "thank you, Louise. I only rode over to see my godfather on a business matter."

"Oh," she said, "I see." Her expression, that had been cheerful and natural at sight of me, turned back to the stiff look of Sunday. "And how is Mrs. Ashley?" she said.

"My cousin Rachel is well, and exceedingly busy," I said. "All the shrubs she brought from Italy arrived this morning, and she is planting them out with Tamlyn in the forcing ground."

"I should have thought you would have stayed at home to help her," said Louise.

"You know I am a fool at gardening," I said, and then, from devilry, I added, "Haven't you got over your ill humour yet?"

She drew herself up and flushed. "Ill humour? I don't know what you mean?" she said quickly.

"Oh, yes, you do," I answered. "You were in a vile humour the whole of Sunday. It was most noticeable. I wonder the Pascoe girls did not remark upon it."

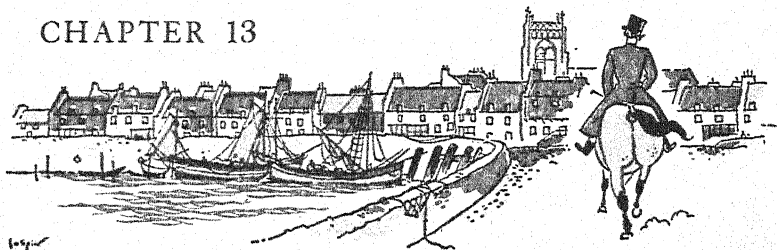
"The Pascoe girls," she said, "like everyone else, were probably far too busy remarking something else."

"And what was that?" I asked.

"How simple it must be for a woman of the world like Mrs. Ashley to twist a young man like yourself around her finger," said Louise.

I turned on my heel and left the room. I could have struck her.

CHAPTER 13



By the time I had ridden back along the high road from Pelyn and across country down into town and so home again, I must have covered near on twenty miles. I had paused for a draught of cider at the inn on the town quay but had eaten nothing, and was well-nigh famished by four o'clock. Arriving at the house I went into the library. The fire was burning brightly, but there was no sign of my cousin Rachel. I rang for Seecombe.

"Where is Mrs. Ashley?" I asked as he entered the room.

"Madam came in a little after three, sir," he said. "She and the gardeners have been working in the grounds ever since you left. Tamlyn is in the steward's room with me now. He says he has never seen anything like it, the manner in which the mistress sets about it. He says she's a wonder."

"She must be exhausted," I said.

"I was afraid of that, sir. I suggested she should go to bed, but

she would not hear of it. 'Tell the boys to bring me up cans of hot water; I'll take a bath, Seecombe,' she said to me, 'and I'll wash my hair as well.' I was about to send for my niece—it seems hardly right for a lady to wash her own hair—but she would not hear of that, either."

"The boys had better do the same for me," I told him. "I've had a hard day, too. And I'm devilish hungry. I want my dinner early."

"Very well, sir. At a quarter to five?"

"Please, Seecombe, if you can manage it."

I went upstairs, whistling, to throw my clothes off and sit in the steaming tub before my bedroom fire. As I rubbed myself dry with the towel, I noticed that on the table beside my bed was a bowl of flowers. Sprigs from the woods, orchis and cyclamen among them. No one had ever put flowers in my room before. Seecombe would not have thought of it, nor the boys, either. It must have been my cousin Rachel. The sight of the flowers added to my mood of high good humour. I tied my cravat and put on my dinner coat, humming a tuneless song. Then I went along the corridor and knocked upon the door of the boudoir.

"Who is it?" she called from within.

"It is me, Philip," I answered. "Dinner will be early tonight. I'm starving, and so I should think are you, after the tales I've heard. What in the world have you and Tamlyn been up to that you have to take a bath and wash your hair?"

That bubble of laughter, so infectious, was her answer.

"We've been burrowing underground like moles," she called.

"Have you earth up to your eyebrows?"

"Earth everywhere," she answered. "I've had my bath and now I am drying my hair. I am pinned up and presentable and look exactly like Aunt Phœbe. You may come in."

I opened the door and went into the boudoir. She was sitting on the stool before the fire, and for a moment I scarcely recognized her, she looked so different out of mourning. She had a white dressing wrapper around her, tied at the throat and at the wrists with ribbon, and her hair was pinned on the top of her head.

I had never seen anything less like Aunt Phœbe, or Aunt anyone. I stood blinking at her in the doorway.

"Come and sit down. Don't look so startled," she said to me.

I shut the door behind me and went and sat down on a chair.

"Forgive me," I said, "but the point is that I have never seen a woman in undress before."

"This isn't undress," she said. "It's what I wear at breakfast. Ambrose used to call it my nun's robe."

She raised her arms and began to jab pins into her hair.

"At twenty-four," she said, "it is high time you saw a homely sight such as Aunt Phœbe doing up her hair. Are you embarrassed?"

I folded my arms and crossed my legs and continued to look at her. "Not in the slightest," I said, "merely stunned."

"Oh, Philip, what a lot you have to learn." She laughed and dropped a hair-pin on my knee. "A keepsake," she said. "Put it under your pillow, and watch Seecombe's face at breakfast."

She passed from the boudoir into the bedroom opposite, leaving the door wide open. "You can sit there and shout through to me while I dress," she called.

I looked furtively at the little bureau to see if there was any sign of my godfather's letter, but could see nothing.

"Where have you been all day?" she called to me.

"I had to go into town," I said. "There were people there I was obliged to see." I need not say a word about the bank.

Just then Seecombe appeared and hovered in the passage.

"What is it, Seecombe? Is dinner ready?" I asked.

"No, sir," he replied. "Mr. Kendall's man, Dobson, has ridden over with a note for Madam." He knocked on her open door and gave in the letter.

"I think I will go below and wait for you in the library," I said.

"No, don't go," she called. "We can go down together. Here is a letter from Mr. Kendall. Perhaps he invites us both to Pelyn."

I felt uneasy, nervous. No sound came from the blue bedroom. She must have been reading the letter. At last she came out of the bedroom, and she stood in the doorway, the letter open in her

hand. She was dressed for dinner. Perhaps it was the contrast of her skin against the mourning that made her look so white.

"What have you been doing?" she said. Her voice sounded quite different. Oddly strained.

"Doing?" I said. "Nothing. Why?"

"Don't lie, Philip. You don't know how."

I stood most wretchedly before the fire, staring anywhere but in those searching, accusing eyes.

"You have been to Pelyn," she said. "You rode over there today to see your guardian. You made him write this letter."

"No," I said, swallowing, "I did nothing of the sort. He wrote it of his own accord. There was business to discuss, and in talking various legal matters came to the fore, and——"

"And you told him your cousin Rachel proposed giving lessons in Italian; isn't that the truth?" she said.

I felt hot and cold and miserably ill at ease. "Not exactly," I said.

"Surely you realized I was only joking when I told you that?" she said. If she was joking, I thought, why then must she be so angry with me now?

She went and stood by the window with her back to me. "If you wish to humiliate me," she said, "by heaven, you have gone the right way about it."

"I don't see," I said, "why you have to be so proud."

"Proud?" She turned round, her eyes very dark and large, and looked at me in fury. "How dare you call me proud?" she said.

I stared back at her. I think I was amazed that anyone who a moment before had been laughing with me could suddenly become so angry. Then, to my own very great surprise, my nervousness went from me. I walked towards her and stood beside her.

"I shall call you proud," I said. "I shall go further, and I shall call you damnably proud. It is not you who is likely to be humiliated but me. It was not a joke when you said that about giving lessons in Italian. Your answer came far too swiftly for it to be a joke. You said it because you meant it."

"And if I did mean it?" she said. "Is there anything shameful in giving lessons in Italian?"

"In the ordinary sense, no," I said, "but in your case, yes. For Mrs. Ambrose Ashley to give lessons in Italian is shameful; it reflects upon the husband who neglected to make provision for her in his will. And I, Philip Ashley, his heir, won't permit it. You will take that allowance every quarter, Cousin Rachel, and when you draw the money from the bank, please remember that it does not come from the estate, nor from the heir to the estate, but from your husband, Ambrose Ashley."

A wave of anger, as great as hers, had come over me as I spoke. I was damned if any creature, small and frail, should stand there and accuse me of humiliating her.

"Well? Do you understand what I have been saying?" I said.

For one moment I thought she was going to hit me. Then her eyes filled with tears and, pushing past me, she went into the bedroom and slammed the door. I walked downstairs and told Seecombe that Mrs. Ashley would not be down for dinner. I poured myself out a glass of claret and sat down alone at the head of the table. Good Lord, I thought, so that's how women behave!

"Is Madam indisposed, sir, do you think?" he asked me.

I might have told him that Madam was not so much indisposed as in a fury and would probably ring her bell in a moment and demand the carriage to take her back to Plymouth.

"No," I said, "her hair is not yet dry. You had better tell John to take a tray up to her boudoir."

Dinner over, I went and sat in the library. I lit my pipe, and put my feet up on the fire-irons, and composed myself to that after-dinner slumber that can be sweet and nonchalant upon occasion, but tonight lacked every charm. I had become used to the sight of her in the chair opposite my own, her shoulders turned so that the light fell upon her work and Don at her feet; now the chair looked strangely empty. I must have dozed, because when I looked up again the hands of the clock in the corner were a little short of nine. To bed then, and to sleep. No sense in sitting on, with the fire gone out. I took the dogs round to the kennels and then bolted up and went to my room. There was a note placed beside

the bowl of flowers on the table next to my bed. It was from my cousin Rachel.

"Dear Philip," it said, "if you can bring yourself to do so, please forgive me for my rudeness to you tonight. It was unpardonable of me to behave so in your house. I have no excuse except that I am not entirely myself these days; emotion lies too near the surface. I have written to your guardian, thanking him for his letter and accepting the allowance. It was generous and dear of you both to think of me. Good night. Rachel."

Had it cost her much to write that note? I wondered. The swing from pride to humility? I hated the fact that she had to do so. For the first time since he had died I found myself blaming Ambrose for what had happened. Surely he might have taken some thought for the future. I wondered if she had left the boudoir yet and gone to bed. I hesitated for a moment, and then went along the corridor and stood by her rooms.

The door of the boudoir was open, the door of the bedroom shut. I knocked upon the bedroom door. For a moment no answer came, and then she said, "Who is it?"

I did not answer "Philip." I opened the door and went inside. The room was in darkness, and the light from my candle showed the curtains of the bed to be partly drawn. I could see the outline of her form under the coverlet.

"I have just read your note," I said. "I wanted to thank you for it and to say good night."

I thought she might sit up and light her candle, but she did not do so. She lay just as she was, on her pillows. The voice that came from the curtains was strangely quiet and subdued. "It would not worry me to give Italian lessons. I have no pride about that sort of thing. What I could not bear was when you said my doing so would reflect badly upon Ambrose."

"It was true," I said, "but forget it now. We need not think of it again."

"It was dear of you, and very like you," she said, "to see your guardian. I must have seemed so completely lacking in gratitude. I can't forgive myself." The voice, so near to tears again, did

something to me. A kind of tightness came to my throat.

"I would much rather that you hit me," I told her, "than that you cried."

I heard her move in her bed and feel for a handkerchief and blow her nose. The gesture and the sound, so commonplace and simple, happening there in the darkness behind the curtains, made me feel even weaker than before.

Presently she said, "I will take the allowance, Philip, but I must not trespass on your hospitality after this week. I think next Monday, if it will suit you, I should leave here and move elsewhere, perhaps to London."

A blank feeling came over me at her words. "Go to London?" I said. "But why? What for?"

"I only came for a few days," she answered. "I have already stayed longer than I intended."

"All right," I said, "if you want to go, do so. It will cause a lot of talk, but no matter."

"I should have thought," she said, "that it would cause more talk if I stayed."

"Talk if you stayed?" I said. "What do you mean? Don't you realize that by rights you belong here, that if Ambrose had not been such a lunatic this would have been your home?"

"Oh, God," she flared out at me in sudden anger, "why else do you think I came?"

I had put my foot in it again. Blundering and tactless, I had said all the wrong things. I felt suddenly hopeless and inadequate. I went up to the bed and pulled aside the curtains and looked down at her. She was lying propped against her pillows, her hands clasped in front of her. She was wearing something white, frilled at the neck like a choirboy's surplice, and her hair was loose, tied behind with a piece of ribbon, as I remembered Louise's as a child. It shook me that she should look so young.

"Listen," I said, "I don't know why you came or what your motives were in doing all you have done. All I know is that I like it now you are here. And I don't want you to go. Is that complicated?"

She had put her hands up to her face, almost in defence, as if she thought I meant to harm her.

"Yes," she said, "very."

"Then it is you who make it so," I said, "not I."

I saw her eyes waver. She was searching in her mind for some excuse why she should be gone, and in a sudden flash I hit upon a master stroke of strategy. I said, "If you have any feeling for the place, knowing what it meant to Ambrose, you would remain here for a few months and lay out the gardens for me."

The shaft struck home. She stared in front of her, playing with her ring. I pushed on with my advantage. "I never could follow the plans that Ambrose used to draw," I said, "nor Tamlyn either. If you remained here—just for the autumn, when so much planting needs to be done—it would help us all."

She twisted the ring back and forth upon her finger. "I think I should ask your godfather what he feels," she said to me.

"It does not concern my godfather," I said. "What do you take me for, a schoolboy under age? There is only one consideration, whether you yourself desire to stay. If you really want to go, I cannot keep you."

She said, surprisingly, in a still small voice, "Why do you ask that? You know I want to stay."

Sweet heaven, how could I know?

"Then you will remain for a little while," I said, "to do the garden? That is settled, and you won't go back on your word?"

"I will remain," she said, "for a little while."

I had difficulty in not smiling. Her eyes were serious, and I had the feeling that if I smiled she would change her mind.

"Very well, then," I said, "I will bid you good night and leave you. Will you sleep now and not be angry with me any more?"

"I wasn't angry, Philip."

"But you were. I thought you were going to hit me."

She looked up at me. "Sometimes you are so stupid," she said, "that I think one day I shall. Come here."

I drew closer; my knee touched the coverlet. "Bend down," she said. She took my face between her hands and kissed me.

"Now go to bed," she said, "like a good boy, and sleep well." She pushed me away and drew her curtains.

I stumbled out of the blue bedroom with my candlestick, light-headed as though I had drunk brandy, and it seemed to me that the advantage I had thought to have over her, as she lay on her pillows, was now completely lost. The last word, and the last gesture, too, had been with her. The little-girl look and the choir-boy surplice had misled me. She was a woman all the time.

Instead of going immediately to bed I went down to the library once again to write a line to my godfather and to reassure him that all had gone off well. I scribbled my letter and went into the hall to place it in the post bag for the morning. Seecombe had left the bag for me, as was his custom, upon the table in the hall, with the key beside it. When I opened up the bag two other letters fell into my hand, both written by my cousin Rachel. One was addressed to my godfather, Nick Kendall. The second letter was addressed to Signor Rainaldi in Florence. I stared at it a moment, then put it back. It was foolish of me, perhaps; the man was her friend, why should she not write a letter to him? Yet as I went upstairs to bed I felt exactly as if she had hit me after all.

CHAPTER 14

THE following day when I joined her in the garden, my cousin Rachel was as happy and unconcerned as though there had never been a rift between us. The only difference in her manner was that she seemed more gentle and tender; she teased me less, and kept asking my opinion as to the planting of the shrubs.

"Do what you want to do," I told her. "Bid the men cut the hedgerows, fell the trees; I have no eye for line."

"But I want the result to please you, Philip," she said. "All this belongs to you and one day will belong to your children."

"Stop talking about my children," I said. "I am quite resolved to remain a bachelor."

"Have you ever thought what you will lose?" she asked.

"I have a shrewd guess," I said, "that the blessings of married

bliss are not all they are claimed to be. If it's warmth and comfort that a man wants, he can get that from his own house."

To my astonishment she laughed so much at my remark that Tamlyn and the gardeners, working at the far end of the plantation, raised their heads to look at us.

"One day," she said to me, "when you fall in love, I shall remind you of those words. Warmth and comfort from stone walls, at twenty-four. Oh, Philip!"

OCTOBER set in fine and mild, and for the first three weeks of it we had barely any rain, so that Tamlyn and the men, under the supervision of my cousin Rachel, were able to go far ahead with the work on the plantation. We managed also to visit in succession all the tenants upon the estate, which gave great satisfaction, as I knew it would. I had known every one of them since boyhood and had been used to calling in upon them every so often, for it was part of my work to do so. But it was a new experience for my cousin Rachel, brought up in Italy to a very different life. Her manner with the people could not have been more right or proper, and it was a fascination to watch her with them. She asked all the right questions, replied with the right answers. Also—and this endeared her to many of them—there was the understanding she seemed to have of all their ailments and the remedies she produced. "With my love for gardening," she told them, "goes a knowledge of herbs. In Italy we always made a study of these things." And she would produce balm from some plant to rub upon wheezing chests, and oil from another as a measure against burns; and she would instruct them, too, how to make *tisana* as a remedy for indigestion and for sleeplessness. Sometimes in the afternoons she would be called upon by the County, as I had warned her. And she was as successful with the "gentry," as Seecombe called them, as she was with the humbler folk.

There was always some story of the callers with which she greeted me when I returned home, slinking by the back way through the woods when the last carriage had bowled safely

down the drive. I would fling myself down in the library and on purpose, to try her, put my muddy boots up on the stool, watching her with one eye. She never reproved me, and if she had noticed did not appear to do so.

"Go on," I would say, "tell me the latest scandal in the county."

So before going upstairs to change for dinner she would regale me with county gossip, what there was of it—the latest betrothals, marriages and deaths, the new babies on the way; she appeared to glean more from twenty minutes' conversation with a stranger than I would from an acquaintance after a lifetime.

"As I suspected," she told me, "you are the despair of every mother within fifty miles."

"Why so?"

"Because you do not choose to look at any of their daughters. So tall, so presentable, so eligible in every way. Pray, Mrs. Ashley, do prevail upon your cousin to go out more."

"And what is your answer?"

"That you find all the entertainment that you need within these four walls. On second thought," she added, "that might be misconstrued. I must watch my tongue."

"I don't mind what you tell them," I said, "as long as you do not involve me in an invitation. I have no desire to look at anybody's daughter."

"There is heavy betting upon Louise," she said; "and the second Miss Pascoe has a sporting chance."

"Great heaven!" I exclaimed. "Belinda Pascoe? I'd as soon marry Katie Searle, who does the washing. Really, Cousin Rachel, you might protect me. What staggers me is the way in which the minds of women run perpetually upon marriage."

"They haven't much else to think about," she said. "I do not escape discussion, I can tell you. A list of eligible widowers has been given me. There is a peer down in West Cornwall declared to be the very thing. Fifty, an heir, and both daughters married."

"Not old St. Ives?" I said in tones of outrage.

"Why, yes, I believe that is the name. They say he's charming."

"Charming, is he?" I said. "He's always drunk by midday,

and creeps around the passages after the maids. Billy Rowe, from the Barton, had a niece in service there. She had to come back home, she grew so scared."

"Who's talking gossip now?" said cousin Rachel. "Poor Lord St. Ives! Perhaps if he had a wife he wouldn't creep about the passages. It would, of course, depend upon the wife."

"Well, you're not going to marry him," I said with firmness.

"You could at least invite him here to dinner?" she suggested, her eyes full of that solemnity that I had learned now spelled mischief. "We could have a party, Philip. The prettiest young women for you and the best-favoured widowers for me. But I think I have made my choice. If I am ever put to it, I will take your godfather. He has a fair direct way of speaking which I much admire."

Maybe she did it on purpose, but I rose to the bait, exploding, "You cannot seriously mean it?" I said. "Marry my godfather? Why, damn it, Cousin Rachel, he's nearing sixty; and he's never without a chill or some complaint."

"That means he doesn't find warmth or comfort inside his house as you do," she answered me.

I knew then that she was laughing, so laughed with her; but afterwards I wondered about it with mistrust. Certainly my godfather was most courteous when he came on Sundays, and they got on capitally together. We had dined there once or twice, and my godfather had sparkled in a way unknown to me. But he had been a widower for ten years. Surely he could not fancy his chance with my cousin Rachel? And surely she would not accept? I went hot at the thought. This, I thought to myself, is another trick of women, to throw a jest in the air that left a sting behind it.

By the end of the month the fine weather broke. It rained for three days without stopping, and there was no gardening to be done, and all callers from the county were kept within their doors like the rest of us. It was Seecombe who suggested what I think we had been shirking, that the time was opportune to go through Ambrose's effects. He broached it one morning as my cousin Rachel and I stood by the library window staring out at the rain.

"The office for me," I had just observed, "and a day in the

boudoir for you. What about those boxes down from London? Gowns to try on, and return again?"

"Not gowns," she said, "but coverings for curtains. I think Aunt Phœbe's eye lacked lustre. The blue bedroom should live up to its name. At present it is grey, not blue at all. And the quilting to the bed has moth, but don't tell Seecombe. The moth of years. I have chosen you new curtains and new quilting."

It was then Seecombe entered and said, "The weather being so inclement, sir, I had thought the boys might be put to cleaning within doors. Your room needs attention. But they cannot dust there while Mr. Ashley's trunks and boxes cover the floor."

I glanced at her, fearing this lack of tact might wound her, but to my surprise she took it well.

"You are quite right, Seecombe," she said. "We have left it far too long. Well, Philip, what about it?"

"Very well," I said, "if you are agreeable. Let us have the fire lit, and when the room is warm we'll go upstairs."

I think that both of us tried to conceal our feelings. For my sake she was determined not to show distress. And I, wishing to spare the same for her, assumed a heartiness utterly foreign to my nature. The fire, that had not been lit since last winter, burned with a false crackle. The boxes stood waiting to be opened; and on the top of one was the well-remembered travel rug of dark blue with the yellow monogram "A.A." I had the sudden recollection of putting it over his knees that last day when he drove away.

My cousin Rachel broke the silence. "Come," she said, "shall we open the clothes trunk first?"

Her voice was purposely hard and practical. I handed her the keys, which she had left in Seecombe's charge on her arrival.

"Just as you will," I said.

She put the key in the lock, and turned it, and threw open the lid. His old dressing-gown was on the top. I knew it well. It was of heavy silk in a dark red colour. His slippers were there, too, long and flat. I stood there staring at them, and it was like walking back into the past. I remembered him passing into my room while he was shaving of a morning, the lather on his face. "Look,

boy, I've been thinking. . . ." Into this room, where we were standing now. Wearing that dressing-gown, wearing those slippers.

"What shall we do with them?" she said, and the voice that had been hard was lower now, subdued.

"I don't know," I said. "It's for you to say."

"Would you wear them if I gave them to you?" she asked.

"No," I said, "no, I don't think so."

She said nothing. She put them on the bed. She came next to a suit of clothing. A light-weight suit—he must have worn it in hot weather. It was not familiar to me, but she must have known it well. She took it out and placed it with the dressing-gown. "It should be pressed," she said. Suddenly she began lifting the things from the trunk very swiftly and putting them in a pile.

"I think," she said, "that if you don't want them, Philip, the people on the estate here, who loved him, might like to have them. You will know best what to give, and to whom."

I think she did not see what she was doing. She took them from the trunk in a sort of frenzy.

Suddenly she was in my arms, her head against my chest.

"Oh, Philip," she said, "forgive me. I should have let you and Seecombe do it. I was a fool to come upstairs."

It was queer. Like holding a child. Like holding a wounded animal. I touched her hair and put my cheek against her head.

"It's all right," I said. "Don't cry. Go back to the library. I can finish it alone."

"No," she said, "it's so weak of me, so stupid. It's just as bad for you as it is for me. You loved him so. . . ."

I kept moving my lips against her hair. It was a strange feeling. And she was very small, standing there against me.

"I don't mind," I said. "A man can do these things. It's not easy for a woman. Let me do it, Rachel; go downstairs."

She wiped her eyes. "No," she said, "it won't happen again."

The boxes of books were nearer to the fire. I brought a chair and placed it for her, close to the warmth, and knelt beside the other trunks and opened them one by one.

I hope she had not noticed that for the first time I had not

called her cousin, but Rachel. I don't know how it happened. I think it must have been because, standing there, with my arms about her, she had been so much smaller than myself.

The books did not have the personal touch about them that the clothes had had. They were old favourites that I knew, with which he always travelled, and these she gave to me to keep beside my bed. There were his cuff-links, too, his studs, his watch, his pen—all these she pressed upon me, and I was glad of them.

She came upon a volume of drawings of the layout of gardens. "This will be very useful to us," she said, and, rising from her chair, took it to the window to see it better in the light.

I opened another book at random. A piece of paper fell from between the leaves. It had Ambrose's handwriting upon it. It seemed like the middle scrap of a letter, torn from its context and forgotten. *It's a disease, of course, I have often heard of it, like kleptomania or some other malady, and has no doubt been handed down to her from her spendthrift father, Alexander Coryn. How*



long she has been a victim of it I cannot say, perhaps always; certainly it explains much of what has disturbed me hitherto in all this business. This much I do know, dear boy, that I cannot any longer—nay, I dare not—let her have command over my purse, or I shall be ruined, and the estate will suffer. It is imperative that you warn Kendall, if by any chance . . . The sentence broke off. There was no end to it. The scrap of paper was not dated. The handwriting was normal. Just then she came back from the window, and I crumpled the piece of paper in my hand.

"What have you there?" she said.

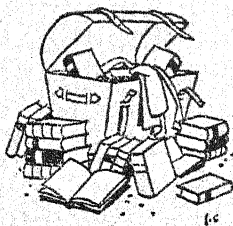
"Nothing," I said. I threw the piece of paper on the fire. She saw it burn. She saw the handwriting on the paper curl and flicker in the flame.

"That was Ambrose's writing," she said. "Was it a letter?"

"It was just some note he had made," I said, "on an old scrap of paper." I felt my face burn in the light of the fire.

Then I reached for another volume from the trunk. She did the same. We continued sorting the books, side by side, together; but the silence had come between us.

CHAPTER 15



WE HAD finished sorting the books by midday. Seecombe sent John up to us, and young Arthur, to know if anything needed carrying downstairs before they went off to their dinner.

"Leave the clothes on the bed, John," I said. "I shall want Seecombe to help me make packages of them by and by. Take these books down to the library."

"And these to the boudoir, Arthur, please," said my cousin Rachel. It was her first utterance since I had burned the scrap of paper.

"Will you not come down to the library," I asked, "and help me put away the books?"

"I think not," she said, then paused a moment, as if to add something, but did not do so. Then she walked along the corridor to her room.

I ate my lunch alone, staring out of the dining-room windows. It was still raining fast. I tried to keep my mind occupied; yet, nagging like a pain in the tooth that flares up suddenly and dies again, my thoughts would be wrenched back to the scrap of paper. What had it been doing between the pages of that book, and how long had it lain there, torn, forgotten? Had Ambrose started upon a letter to me which never reached its destination? Were there other bits of paper, parts of the same letter, which for some reason were still lying between the pages of a book?

All afternoon Seecombe and I sorted the clothes, and he put them into packages while I wrote notes of explanation to go with them. When we had finished I went downstairs again to the library and put the books on to the shelves. I found myself shaking the leaves of each volume before I placed it on the shelf; and as I did so I felt furtive, like someone guilty of a petty crime . . . *a disease, of course, like kleptomania or some other malady*. . . . What did Ambrose mean?

I reached for a dictionary and looked up kleptomania. "An irresistible tendency to theft in persons not tempted to do it by needy circumstances." That was not his accusation. His accusation was one of extravagance. How could extravagance be a malady?

I went upstairs and dressed, and when I came down again dinner was upon the table. My cousin Rachel and I took our places in silence. Seecombe, from long habit, would break in upon our conversation when he had something that he wished to say, and tonight, when we had nearly finished, he said to my cousin Rachel, "Have you shown Mr. Philip the new coverings, Madam?"

"No, Seecombe," she answered, "there hasn't yet been time. But if he cares to see them I can do so after dinner."

"Coverings?" I said, puzzled. "What coverings are they?"

"Don't you remember?" she answered. "I told you I had ordered coverings for the blue bedroom. Seecombe has seen them and is very much impressed."

"Oh, yes," I said, "yes, I remember now."

"I have seen nothing like them, sir," said Seecombe. "Certainly no mansion in these parts has any furnishings to touch them."

"Ah, but then the stuff is imported from Italy, Seecombe," said my cousin Rachel. "There is only one place in London where it is procurable. Would you like to see the coverings, Philip—or does it not interest you?"

She put the question to me half hopefully, half anxiously, as though wishing for my opinion, yet fearing I should be bored.

I don't know how it was, but I felt myself go scarlet. "Why, yes," I said, "I shall be pleased to look at them."

We rose from dinner and went into the library. Seecombe followed us, and in a moment or two he and John brought down the coverings. Seecombe was right. There could be no other furnishings like these in Cornwall. I had seen none like them anywhere. Rich brocades and heavy silken hangings. They were the kinds of stuffs you might see in a museum.

"There is quality for you, sir," said Seecombe. His voice was hushed. He might have been in church.

"I thought this blue for the bed hangings," said my cousin Rachel, "and the deeper blue and gold for the curtains, and the quilting for the coverlet. What do you say, Philip?"

She looked up at me anxiously. I did not know how to answer.

"Do you not like them?" she said to me.

"I like them very much," I said, "but"—I felt myself go red again—"are they not very dear?"

"Oh, yes, they are dear," she answered, "any stuff like this is dear, but it will last for years, Philip. Why, your grandson and great-grandson will be able to sleep in the blue bedroom, with these coverings upon the bed and these hangings for the curtains. The only thing that matters is whether you like them, Philip."

"Why, yes," I said, "who could help but like them?"

"Then they are yours," she told me. "They are a present to you from me. Take them away, Seecombe. I will write to the place in London in the morning and say we will keep them."

"You should not give me a present like that," I said awkwardly. "It will cost you far too much."

"But I want to give them to you," she said. "You have done so much for me. It's such a little gift to give in return."

Her voice was soft and pleading, and when I glanced up at her there was quite a wounded look about her eyes.

"It's very sweet of you," I said, "but I don't think you should do it, all the same."

Presently she said to me, "I found a book of gardens that is going to be very helpful for our planning here; certain features would work in well. A terraced walk, for instance, looking down to the sea across the fields, and on the other side of it a sunken water garden—as they have in one of the villas in Rome where I used to stay. I know just the spot for it."

I hardly know how I did it, but I found myself asking her in a voice at once casual and off-hand, "Have you always lived in Italy?"

"Yes," she answered, "did Ambrose never tell you? My mother's people came from Rome, and my father, Alexander Coryn, never could bear England; I think he did not get on very well with his family here in Cornwall. He liked the life in Rome, and he and my mother suited each other well. But they led a precarious sort of existence—never any money, you know. I was used to it as a child, but as I grew up it was most unsettling."

"Are they both dead?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, my father died when I was sixteen. Mother and I were alone for five years. Until I married Cosimo Sangalletti. Five fearful years they were, too, moving from city to city, not always certain where our next meal would come from."

So she had been twenty-one when she married first. The same age as Louise. I wondered how they had lived, she and her mother, until she met Sangalletti. Perhaps they had given lessons in Italian, as she had suggested doing here.

"My mother was very beautiful," she said, "quite different from me, except for colouring. Tall, almost massive. And like many women of her type, she went suddenly to pieces, lost her looks,

grew fat and careless; I was glad my father did not live to see it. I was glad he did not live to see many things she did, or I either, for that matter."

"Was your husband much older than you?" I said to her.

"Cosimo?" she said. "Why, no, only a year or so. My mother was introduced to him in Florence; she had always wanted to know the Sangallettis. He took nearly a year before he made up his mind between my mother and myself. Then she lost her looks, poor dear, and lost him, too. The bargain I picked up proved a liability."

She sighed and patted the cushion behind her head. "Ah, well," she said, "it all seems very long ago now. The girl who endured those years was another person. I would not be young again if you offered me the world. But then I'm prejudiced."

"You talk," I said, "as if you were ninety-nine."

"For a woman, I very nearly am," she said. "I'm thirty-five."

She looked at me and smiled. And then, suddenly, she asked, "What was really on that piece of paper you threw on the fire this morning?"

The suddenness of the attack caught me unprepared. I stared back at her and swallowed hard. Hastily I decided that a half-truth was better than a lie. Although I felt the colour flame into my face, I met her eyes.

"It was a piece torn from a letter," I said, "a letter, I think, that Ambrose must have been writing to me. He simply expressed himself as worried about expenditure. There was only a line or two."

Rather to my surprise, but to my relief also, the eyes watching me so intently relaxed. "Was that all?" she said. "I wondered so much. . . . I could not understand."

Thank heaven, though, she accepted my explanation.

"Poor Ambrose," she said, "it was a constant source of worry to him, what he considered my extravagance. And then—good heaven, I cannot blame him—I know at the bottom of his heart he bore resentment against the life I had been obliged to lead before I met him. Those frightful debts, he paid them all."

I felt easier in my mind, no longer anxious. The half-truth had

been successful, and she was speaking to me now without strain.

"He was so generous," she said, "those first months. You cannot imagine, Philip, what it meant to me; at last someone I could trust and, what was more wonderful still, someone I could love as well. I think if I had asked him for anything on earth he would have given it to me. That was why, when he became ill——" She broke off, and her eyes were troubled. "That was why it was so hard to understand, the way he changed."

"You mean," I said, "that he wasn't generous any more?"

"He was generous, yes," she said, "but not in the same way. He would buy me things, presents, pieces of jewellery, almost as though he tried to test me in some way; I can't explain it. And if I asked him for any money, some little necessity for the house—he used to look at me with a strange brooding sort of suspicion; he would ask me why I wanted the money, how I intended to use it, was I going to give it to anyone. . . . Eventually I had to go to Rainaldi; I had to ask Rainaldi, Philip, for money to pay the servants' wages——"

Suddenly she gestured with her hands and got up from her chair. "I did not mean to tell you all this," she said.

She went over to the window and pulled aside the curtain, and looked out at the driving rain.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because I want you to remember him as you knew him here," she said. "You have your picture of him in this house. He was your Ambrose then. Let it stay like that."

"Rachel. Come here," I said.

She came across the room to me and she put her hands in mine.

"There is no bitter feeling in this house," I said to her. "The house is mine. Bitterness goes with people when they die. From now on you are going to remember Ambrose as I remember him. We'll keep his old hat there on the settle in the hall. And the stick, with the others, in the stand. You belong here now, just as he did, just as I do. Do you understand?"

She looked up at me. She did not take away her hands.

"Yes," she said.

I felt strangely moved, as if all that I did and said was laid down for me and planned, while at the same time a small, still voice whispered to me in some dark cell of matter, "You can never go back upon this moment. Never . . . never . . ."

She moved away and picked up her candlestick to take to bed. "Good night, Philip, and God bless you. One day you may come to know some of the happiness that I knew once."

I heard her go upstairs, and I sat down and stared into the fire. The jealousy I thought buried and forgotten was with me once again. But this time I was jealous, not of Rachel, but of Ambrose, whom hitherto I had loved most in the whole world.

CHAPTER 16

NOVEMBER and December passed very swiftly. We settled down to a routine, my cousin Rachel and myself, and it seemed to suit us well. When the weather permitted it, she would spend the morning in the grounds directing Tamlyn and the gardeners about the planting, or watching the progress of the terraced walk we had decided upon; while I did my usual business about the estate. We met at half past twelve for a brief meal, cold usually, a ham or pie, with cake. It was the servants' dinner hour, and we waited on ourselves. It would be my first sight of her for the day, for she always took breakfast in her room.

When I was out and about on the estate, or in my office, and heard the clock on the belfry strike noon, followed almost at once by the great clanging bell that summoned the men to their dinner, I would be aware of a rising excitement within me, a sudden lifting of the heart. I could hardly wait to get to the dining-room.

She was usually there before me to give me welcome and wish me a good morning. Often she laid a sprig beside my plate, as a sort of offering, which I would put into my buttonhole; or there would be some new cordial for me to taste, one of those herb brews of which she seemed to have a hundred recipes.

When we had eaten luncheon she would go upstairs to rest, or

if it was a Tuesday or a Thursday I might order the carriage for her, and Wellington would drive her about the neighbourhood to return the calls that had been made upon her.

I would not see her again until we dined at five, and the intervening hours became something to be gone through for the evening's sake. All afternoon I had a sense of urgency, an impatience to be done. How was the time? I would look at Ambrose's watch. Still only half past four? And coming back to the house by way of the stables, I would know at once if she had returned, for I would see the carriage in the coach-house. Going into the house, passing into the library and the drawing-room, I would see both rooms were empty, and this would mean she had gone up to her rooms to rest. Then I would change, and go down into the library below to wait for her. My impatience mounted as the hands of the clock drew nearer to five. I would leave the door of the library open so that I could hear her step.

First would come the patter of the dogs—I counted for nothing with them now, they followed her like shadows—and then the rustle of her gown as it swept the stairs. It was, I think, the moment I loved best in the whole day. There was something in the sound that gave me such a shock of anticipation that I hardly knew what to do or what to say when she came into the room.

Seecombe would announce dinner, and we would pass into the dining-room and take our places, I at the head of the table, she at my right hand, and it seemed to me this had always happened, there was nothing new in it and nothing strange. Yet, if it had always happened, it would not have seemed stimulating to me, as it did now, with the mere process of eating and drinking becoming, in a sense, a new adventure.

We did not always sit below in the library. Sometimes she would ask me to go with her upstairs, to Aunt Phœbe's boudoir, and we would spread out the books and plans of gardens upon the floor. I was host in the library down below, but here in her boudoir she was hostess. I am not sure I did not like it better. We lost formality. Seecombe did not bother us—by some great measure of tact she had got him to dispense with the solemnity of

the silver tea tray—and she would brew *tisana* for us, which she said was a continental custom much better for the eyes and skin.

These after-dinner hours passed all too swiftly, and I would hope that she would forget to ask the time, but the wretched clock in the belfry, far too close to our heads to strike ten o'clock and not be noticed, always shattered the peace.

"I had no idea it was so late," she used to say, rising and closing up the books, and I knew this was the signal for dismissal. Even the trick of lingering by the door in conversation did not pass with her. Ten o'clock had struck, and I must go. Sometimes she gave me her hand to kiss. Sometimes she offered me a cheek. Sometimes she patted me upon the shoulder as she might have done a puppy. Never again did she come close to me or take my face between her hands as she had done that evening when she lay in bed. I did not look for it, I did not hope for it; but when I had said good night and gone back to my own room, opened up my shutters and stared out at the silent garden, and heard the distant murmur of the sea breaking in the little bay beneath the woods, I would feel oddly lonely, as a child does when holiday is done.

IN OLD days, at Christmas, when Ambrose had been home, he had given dinner to the tenants on Christmas Eve. I had let it lapse the last winters of his absence, because when he had returned from travelling he held the dinner on Midsummer Day. Now I decided to give the dinner once again, as of long custom, if only for the reason that Rachel would be there.

And so, I gave my orders to the woodmen: in fact, I went out myself into the woods to choose the fir tree. Rachel was all delight. She held earnest consultation with Seecombe and the cook: she even prevailed upon my male household to allow two girls from the Barton to come up and make French pastry under her supervision. All was excitement and mystery because I would have it that she should not see the tree, and she insisted that I must know nothing of what would be put before us for the dinner.

Packages arrived for her and were whisked away upstairs. When I knocked upon her boudoir door I would hear crackling of paper

and then, an age afterwards, it seemed, her voice would answer me, "Come in." And she would be kneeling on the floor, her eyes bright, her cheeks flushed, with a covering flung over several objects strewn about the carpet, and she would tell me not to look.

One thing gave me anxiety. What could I give Rachel for a present? I took a day in Truro, browsing in the bookshops for a book on gardens, but decided that the books she had brought from Italy were finer than any I could give her. Once, I remember, Louise had been much delighted with a locket my godfather brought from London. She used to wear it of an evening, when she ate Sunday dinner with us. And then the solution came to me.

There must be something among the jewels belonging to my family that I could give to Rachel. They were not kept at home in the safe with the Ashley documents and papers, but at the bank. My godfather would know what jewels there were, but he had gone up to Exeter on business and would not be home until Christmas Eve. I determined to go to the bank myself and demand to see the jewels. Mr. Couch received me with his usual courtesy and, taking me into his private room, he listened to my request. "I take it Mr. Kendall would have no objection?" he asked.

"Of course not," I said impatiently, "the matter is quite understood." Which was untruthful, but at twenty-four, within a few months of my birthday, to have to ask my godfather for permission to do every little thing was quite ridiculous.

I had no idea the collection was so fine. There were rings, bracelets, ear-rings, brooches; and many of the pieces went together, such as a ruby head-piece for the hair and ruby ear-rings to go with it, likewise a sapphire bracelet and pendant and ring. Then Mr. Couch opened the last box and drew from it a collar of pearls. There were four strands, with a single diamond clasp.

"I like this," I said. "This is the finest thing in the collection. I remember Ambrose showing it to me when I was a child."

"Why, there might be a difference of opinion," said Mr. Couch. "I would price the rubies highest. But there is family feeling about the pearl collar. Your grandmother, Mrs. Ambrose Ashley, wore it first as a bride, at the Court of St. James's. Then your aunt, Mrs.

Philip, had it given to her when the estate passed down to your uncle. Various members of the family have worn it on their wedding day. Your own mother was among them; I think she was the last to do so." He held the collar in his hand, and the light from the window fell upon the smooth round pearls.

I put out my hand and took the collar from him. "Well, I want to keep it now," I said, and I placed the collar with its wrappings in the box. He looked a little taken aback.

"I do not know if that is wise, Mr. Ashley," he said. "If this should be lost or mislaid it would be a terrible thing."

"It won't be lost," I answered briefly. He did not seem happy, and I made haste to go, lest he should produce some argument more forceful.

I rode home much elated. If I had searched the whole country I could not have found a better present for her. And it made a bond to think that the last woman to wear them had been my mother. I would tell her that. Now I could face the prospect of Christmas Eve with a lighter heart.

Dinner was set to start at five. The Kendalls and the Pascoes would be the only "carriage folk," as the expression had it. The rest would come by wagonette or trap, or even on their own feet. There were three tables. I was to head one, with Rachel at the farther end. The second was headed by Billy Rowe from the Barton, and the third by Peter Johns from Coombe.

The custom was for all the company to be assembled in the long room over the coach-house, ready-seated, soon after five; and when everyone was in place we would walk into the room. When dinner was over, Ambrose and I used to give the people their presents from the tree, always money for the men, new shawls for the women, and hampers of food for all of them. The presents never varied. Any change of routine would have shocked them, every one. This Christmas, though, I had asked Rachel to give out the presents with me.

Before dressing for dinner I had sent along to Rachel's room the collar of pearls. I had left it in its wrappings but had placed a note inside. On the note I had written these words, "My mother

wore this last. Now it belongs to you. I want you to wear it to-night, and always. Philip."

I had my bath and dressed and was ready before a quarter to five. I came downstairs and waited in the drawing-room. I felt some trepidation as I stood there, for never in my life had I given a present to a woman.

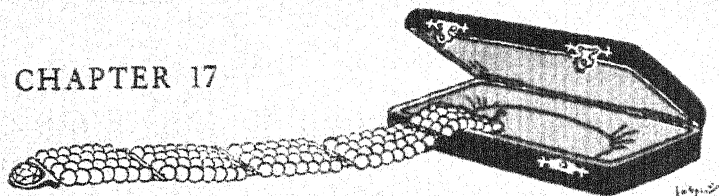
She came slowly; the familiar rustle of her gown drew near. The door was open, and she came into the room and stood before me. She wore deep black, as I had expected, but I had not seen the gown before. It stood out, away from her, clinging only about the bodice and the waist, and the stuff had a sheen to it as though the light were upon it. Her shoulders were bare. She had dressed her hair higher than usual; the roll of it was looped up and drawn back, showing her ears. Around her neck was the collar of pearls. It was the only piece of jewellery upon her person. It glowed soft and white against her skin. I had never seen her look so radiant or so happy. She was beautiful.

She stood there a moment watching me, and then she put out her hands to me and said, "Philip." I walked towards her. She put her arms about me and held me to her. There were tears in her eyes, but tonight I did not mind. She raised her hands to the back of my head and touched my hair.

Then she kissed me. Not as she had done before. And as I stood there holding her, I thought to myself, "It was not yearning for home, nor sickness of the blood, nor fever of the brain—but for this—that Ambrose died."

I kissed her in return. In the belfry the clock struck five. She said nothing to me, nor I to her. She gave me her hand. We went down the dark kitchen passages together, across the court, and so to the long room above the coach-house, where the windows were brightly lighted.

CHAPTER 17



THE whole company stood up as we came into the room. The tables were pushed back, there was shuffling of feet, the murmur of voices hushed; the heads of one and all turned round to look at us. Rachel paused a moment on the threshold. Then she saw the Christmas tree at the far end and gave a cry of pleasure. The pause was broken, and a murmur of sympathy and gladness at her surprise arose from everyone.

We took our places at our respective ends of the top table, and Rachel sat down. The rest did the same, and at once a clamour of chat and talk began, with clattering of knives and moving of platters and each man jostling his neighbour in laughter and apology. The kitchen had done us well. Never in my long memories of Christmas dinners had we been offered plenty such as this. Roast goose, roast turkey, sides of beef and mutton, great smoked hams decorated with frills, pastries and pies of all shapes and sizes, puddings bulging with dried fruits, and platters of that delicate fragile pastry that Rachel had concocted with the Barton maids.

It was then I noticed that each one of us had a small package beside his plate addressed in Rachel's handwriting. Everybody seemed to perceive this at the same time, and for a brief moment the food was forgotten in the excited tearing of the paper. I realized with a sudden ache in my heart what she had done. She had given every man and woman assembled there a present. She had wrapped them up herself, and enclosed with each a note. Nothing big or fine, but a little trifle that would please them well.

When each of my neighbours had fallen to their food again I opened my own. I unwrapped it on my knees, beneath the table,

determined that only I myself should see what had been given me. It was a gold chain for my keys, with a disk upon it bearing our initials, P.A. R.A., and the date beneath. I held it for a moment in my hands, then put it furtively into my waistcoat pocket. I looked up at her and smiled. She was watching me. I raised my glass to her; she raised hers in reply. God! I was happy.

Dinner proceeded, uproarious and gay. Glasses were filled, and filled again. Someone halfway down the table began to sing, and the song was taken up and joined by those from the other tables. Boots hummed a measure on the floor, knives and forks beat time upon the platters, bodies swayed to and fro in rollicking rhythmic fashion, and thin-lipped Mrs. Johns of Coombe, on my left, told me that, for a man, my lashes were far too long.

At last, remembering how Ambrose timed his moment to perfection, I rapped long and loud upon the table. The voices died away. "Those who desire to do so," I said, "may go outside and then return again. In five minutes' time, Mrs. Ashley and I will give the presents from the tree. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen."

The pressure to the doors was precisely what I had expected. Those who remained pushed the benches and the trestles against the wall. After the presents had been given from the tree and we had departed, those who were able to do so would take their partners in a dance. High revelry would last until midnight.

I made my way over to the little group standing by the tree. The vicar was there, and Mrs. Pascoe, their two daughters and a curate. Likewise my godfather and Louise. Louise looked well but a trifle pale. I shook hands with them. Mrs. Pascoe gushed at me, all teeth, "You have surpassed yourself. Never have we enjoyed ourselves so much. The girls are quite in ecstasy."

They looked it, with one curate between two of them.

"I'm glad you thought it went off well," I said, and, turning to Rachel, "Have you been happy?"

Her eyes met mine and smiled. "What do you think?" she said. "So happy I could cry."

I saluted my godfather. "Good evening to you, sir, and happy Christmas," I said. "How did you find Exeter?"



"Cold," he said shortly, "cold and drear."

His manner was abrupt. He stood with his hands behind his back. I wondered if something about the dinner had upset him. Then I saw him stare at Rachel. His eyes were fixed upon the collar of pearls around her throat. He saw me staring, and he turned away. For a moment I felt back again in the fourth form at Harrow, with the master discovering the crib hidden under my Latin book. Then I shrugged my shoulders. I was Philip Ashley, aged four-and-twenty years. And no one in the world, certainly not my godfather, could dictate to me to whom I should or should not give Christmas presents.

The people came stumping back into the room. Laughing, murmuring, pressing together, they came nearer to the tree as Rachel



and I took our stand before it. It took us the better part of half an hour to give the presents and to say a word to each guest. When it was over and done with, the last present accepted with a curtsy, a sudden silence fell. The people, standing all together in a great group against the wall, waited for me. "A happy Christmas to you, one and all," I said. And back came the shout from the whole lot of them as one, "A happy Christmas to you, sir, and to Mrs. Ashley."

I smiled and, drawing Rachel's hand inside my arm, I led her back from the long room to the house. The others followed in turn.

Then Mrs. Pascoe, who was surely born into this world, heaven save her, to wreck all harmony with her blabbing tongue, turned to Rachel and said, "Mrs. Ashley, what a beautiful pearl collar

you are wearing. I have had eyes for nothing else all evening."

Rachel smiled at her and touched the collar with her fingers. "Yes," she said, "it is a very proud possession."

"Proud indeed," said my godfather drily. "It's worth a small fortune."

I think only Rachel and myself noticed his tone of voice. She glanced at my godfather, puzzled, and was about to speak when I moved forward. "I think the carriages have come," I said.

I went and stood by the drawing-room door. Even Mrs. Pascoe, usually deaf to suggestions of departure, saw by my manner that her evening had reached its climax. "Come, girls," she said, "you must both be tired, and we have a busy day before us. No rest for a clergyman's family, Mr. Ashley, on Christmas Day." I escorted the Pascoe family to the door. As they drove away the Kendall carriage drew forward in its turn. I turned back to the drawing-room and found it empty save for my godfather.

"Louise and Mrs. Ashley went upstairs," he said. "I am glad of the opportunity to have a word with you, Philip."

I crossed over to the fireplace and stood there with my hands behind my back. "Yes?" I said. "What is it?"

He did not answer for a moment. He was plainly embarrassed.

"I had no chance to see you before I left for Exeter," he said, "or I would have spoken of this before. The fact is, Philip, I have had a communication from the bank that I find decidedly disturbing."

"From Mr. Couch, I suppose?" I said to him.

"Yes," he answered. "He advises me that Mrs. Ashley is already several hundred pounds overdrawn on her account."

I felt myself go cold. I stared back at him; then the tension snapped, and the colour flamed into my face. "Oh?" I said.

"I don't understand it," he continued, pacing the floor. "She can have few expenses here. She is living as your guest, and her wants must be few. The only thing that occurs to me is that she is sending the money out of the country."

My heart was beating against my ribs. "She is very generous," I

said. "You must have noticed that tonight. A present for each one of us. That cannot be done on a few shillings."

"Several hundred pounds would pay for them a dozen times over," he replied. "I don't doubt her generosity, but presents alone cannot account for an overdraft."

"She has taken it upon herself to spend money on the house," I said. "There have been furnishings bought for the blue bedroom. You can take all that into consideration."

"Possibly," said my godfather, "but nevertheless, the fact remains that the sum we decided to give her quarterly has already been doubled, nearly trebled, by the amount she has withdrawn. What are we to decide for the future?"

"Double, treble the amount we give her now," I said. "Obviously what we gave was not sufficient." He stood before me with pursed lips. I wanted the matter over, done with.

"Another thing," he said uneasily. "You had no right, Philip, to take that collar from the bank. You realize, don't you, that it is part of the estate, and you have not the right to remove it?"

"It is mine," I said. "I can do what I like with my property."

"The property is not yet yours," he said.

"What of it?" I gestured. "Three months pass quickly. No harm can come to the collar in her keeping."

He glanced up at me. "I am not so sure," he said.

The implication in his words drove me to fury.

"Good Lord!" I said. "What are you suggesting? That she might take that collar and sell it?"

For a moment he did not reply.

"Since going to Exeter," he said, "I have come to learn a little more about your cousin Rachel."

"What the devil do you mean?" I asked.

His eyes went from me to the door, then back again.

"It happened that I came across old friends," he said, "people you would not know, who are great travellers. It seems that they met your cousin when she was married to her first husband, Sangalletti."

"Well?"

"Both were notorious. For unbridled extravagance and, I must add, for loose living also. The duel in which Sangalletti died was fought because of another man. These people said that when they learned of Ambrose Ashley's marriage to the Countess Sangalletti they were horrified. They predicted that she would run through his entire fortune within a few months. I am sorry, Philip. But this news much disturbed me." He paced the floor.

"I did not think that you would fall so low as to listen to travellers' tales," I said to him. "Who are these people, anyway? How dare they repeat gossip of over ten years past?"

"Never mind that now," he replied. "My concern now is with those pearls. I am sorry, but as your guardian for another three months I must ask you to request that she return the collar. I will have it placed in the bank again with the rest of the jewellery."

"Return the collar?" I said. "But how can I possibly ask her to do that? I gave it to her tonight as a Christmas present."

"Come, Philip," he said, altering his tone, "you are very young, very impressionable, and I quite understand that you wanted to give your cousin some token of esteem. But family jewels are rather more than that."

In the intensity of our discussion we had not heard the rustle of the gowns upon the stairs. Now it was too late. Rachel, followed by Louise, stood in the doorway.

She stood there, her head turned towards my godfather, who was planted in the centre of the drawing-room, confronting me.

"I am sorry," she said, "I could not help but overhear what you have said. Please, I don't want either of you to embarrass yourselves on my account. It was dear of Philip to let me wear the pearls tonight, and quite right, Mr. Kendall, of you to ask for their return. Here they are."

She took off the collar and gave it to my godfather. He had the grace to look uncomfortable, yet relieved too.

I saw Louise look at me with pity. I turned away.

"Thank you, Mrs. Ashley," said my godfather in his gruff way. "You understand that this collar is really part of the estate trust, and Philip had no business to take it from the bank. It was a

foolish, thoughtless action. But young men are headstrong."

"I perfectly understand," she said. "Let us say no more about it."

He took a handkerchief from his breast pocket and placed the collar in the middle of it with great care.

"And now," he said, "I think that Louise and I will say good night. Thank you for a delightful and successful dinner, Philip, and I wish you both a happy Christmas."

I did not answer. I went out into the hall and stood by the front door and handed Louise into the carriage without a word. She pressed my hand, but I was too moved to answer her. My godfather climbed in beside her, and they went away.

I walked slowly back to the drawing-room. Rachel was standing there, gazing down into the fire. I stood looking at her without speaking, angry, miserable. At sight of me she put out her arms and I went to her. My heart was too full to speak.

"No," she said, her voice tender with the warmth that was so much part of her, "you must not mind. Please, Philip, please. I am so proud to have worn it for that once."

"Well, it's spoiled now," I said, "the whole evening, the whole of Christmas. Everything is wasted."

She held me close and laughed. "You are like a child," she said, "running to me with empty hands. Poor Philip." I stood away and looked down upon her.

"I am no child," I said, "I am five-and-twenty years, all but three blasted months. My mother wore those pearls on her wedding day, and before that my aunt, and before that my grandmother. Don't you realize why I wanted you to wear them, too?"

She put her hands on my shoulders and kissed me once again.

"Why, yes," she answered, "that was why I was so happy and so proud. You wanted me to wear them because you knew that, had I been married here and not in Florence, Ambrose would have given them to me on our wedding day."

I said nothing. She had told me some weeks back that I lacked perception. Tonight I might have said the same of her. A few moments later she patted me on the shoulder and went upstairs to bed.

CHAPTER 18

FROM Christmas onward a coolness came between my godfather and myself. That he should have listened to petty lying gossip was bad enough, but even more I resented his sticking to the quibble in the will which left me under his jurisdiction for three more months. What if Rachel had spent more than we had foreseen? We had not known her needs. Neither Ambrose nor my godfather had understood the way of life in Florence. Extravagant she well might be, but was it so great a crime?

He had accused Rachel of frittering away her allowance. Well, he could accuse me of wanton waste about my house. I decided, after the New Year, that I wished to make improvements to the property that would be mine. But not only to the gardens. The terracing of the walk above the Barton fields proceeded, also the preparation of the ground beside it that was to become the sunken water garden, copied from the engraving in Rachel's book.

I was determined to repair the house as well. Too little had been done about the place since the old days. I would make amends for past neglect, and if my godfather pulled a face and drew sums upon his blotter he could go hang himself.

So I went my own way about the business, and before January was out some fifteen to twenty men were working on my roof or about the building, and inside the house as well, decorating ceilings and walls to my orders. It gave me the greatest satisfaction to picture my godfather's expression when the bills for the work should be submitted to him. I made the repairs about the house serve as an excuse for not entertaining visitors, thereby putting an end, for the time being, to Sunday dinners. Therefore, I was spared the regular visits of the Pascoes and the Kendalls and saw nothing of my godfather, which was part of my intention.

One morning in early spring Secombe came to me and told me that Sam Bate, up at the East Lodge, who was feeling poorly, wished that I would go and see him, as he had something of importance to give me. In the afternoon I walked to the lodge to have

a word with him. Sam was sitting up in bed, and lying on the blanket before him was one of the coats that had belonged to Ambrose, which had been given to him on Christmas Day. I recognized it as the light-coloured one I had not known, which Ambrose must have bought for the hot weather on the continent.

"Well, Sam," I said, "I am sorry to find you in bed. What is the matter?"

"The same old cough, Mr. Philip, sir, that catches me aback every spring," replied the man.

"You must send your daughter to ask Mrs. Ashley for some cordial to cure it," I said. "She has great knowledge of such things. Oil of eucalyptus is one of her remedies."

"I will, Mr. Philip, I will, but first I felt it right to ask you to come yourself, concerning the matter of the letter."

"What letter, Sam?" I asked.

"Mr. Philip," he replied, "on Christmas Day you and Mrs. Ashley kindly gave some of us clothes and the like belonging to the late master. And very proud we are, all of us, to have the same. Now this coat was given to me." He paused and touched the coat. "I brought it up here, sir, that same night," Sam continued, "but wear it I would not, Mr. Philip. 'Twould have seemed presuming on my part. So I put the coat away in the press yonder and took it out now and agin and had a look at it. Then, when this cough seized me and I lay up here abed, the fancy came upon me to wear the coat. Which I did, Mr. Philip, for the first time yesterday. It was then I found the letter." He paused, and fumbling under his pillow, drew forth a packet. "The letter must have slipped down inside the lining, Mr. Philip. I felt the crackling of it and made so bold as to open up the lining. And here it is, sir. A letter, plain as day. Sealed and addressed to you by Mr. Ambrose himself. I know his hand of old. It shook me, sir, to come upon it. It seemed as though I had come upon a message from the dead."

He gave the letter to me. I looked down at the familiar handwriting and felt a sudden wrench at my heart. I thanked him and after putting the letter away in my breast-pocket talked for a few minutes or so before I left him. Some intuition made me tell him

to say nothing of the business to anyone. He promised, and I left the lodge. I climbed up through the woods to a path that runs above that part of the estate bordering the Trenant acres and the wooded avenue. It was our highest point of land, saving the beacon to the south, and had a fine view over the woods and the valley to the open sea. At the end of the path Ambrose had set up a piece of granite. "This," he said to me, half joking, half in earnest, "can serve me for tombstone when I die. Think of me here rather than in the family vault with the other Ashleys."

Upon the slab of granite he had scrolled a line of doggerel to make us laugh when we looked at it together. When I came to it today I stood for a moment with my hands upon the slab, and I could not bring myself to a decision. The glory of the day had gone, and it was colder. Clouds had come across the sky, and beyond the marshes, in the bay, the sea was slaty grey. A little wind blew shoreward, rustling the trees below me.

I sat down beside the slab and like a small boy who prays that the weather will be fine upon his birthday, I prayed God now that the letter should contain nothing to disturb me, and so opened it. It was dated April of the preceding year, and was therefore written three months before he died.

Dearest boy,

If my letters have been infrequent, it is not because I have not thought of you. You have been in my mind, these past months, perhaps more than ever before. But a letter can miscarry or be read by others; therefore, I have not written. I have been ill with fever and bad headaches. Better now. But for how long, I cannot tell. The fever may come again, and the headaches, too, and when in the grip of them I am not responsible for what I say or do. This much is certain.

But I am not yet certain of the cause. Philip, dear boy, I am in agony of mind. I wrote to you, during the winter I think it was, but was ill shortly afterwards and have no recollection what happened to the letter; I may very well have destroyed it in the mood that possessed me. In it I believe I told you of her fault that caused me so much concern. Whether hereditary or not I cannot say, but

I believe so, and believe also that the loss of our child, only a few months on its way, did her irreparable harm.

This, by the way, I had kept from you in my letters; we were both much shaken at the time. For my part, I have you and am consoled. But with a woman it goes deeper. She had made plans and projects, as you can imagine, and when after but four and a half months it went for nothing and she was told by her doctor there could not be another, her distress was very great. I could swear her manner altered from that time. The recklessness with money became progressive, and I perceived in her a tendency to evasion, to lies, to withdrawal from me, that was completely contrary to the warm nature that was hers when we first married. As the months passed I noticed more and more that she turned for advice to this man I have mentioned before in my letters, Signor Rainaldi, rather than to me. I believe this man to have a pernicious influence upon her. I suspect him of having been in love with her for years, even when Sangalletti was alive, and although I do not for an instant believe that she ever thought of him in such a connection up to a short while ago, now, since she has altered in her manner to me. I cannot be so sure. There is a shadow in her eye, a tone in her voice, when his name is said that awakens in my mind the most terrible suspicion.

Brought up as she was by feckless parents, living a life, before and during her first marriage, about which both of us have had reserve. I have often felt that her code of behaviour is different from ours. The tie of marriage may not be so sacred. I suspect—in fact, I have proof—that he gives her money. Money, God forgive me for saying so, is at the present time the one way to her heart.

At times she seems like her true self and all is well, so well that I feel I have been through some nightmare and wake again to the happiness of the first months of our marriage. Then, with a word or an action, all is lost again. I will come down to the terrace and find Rainaldi there. At sight of me, both fall silent. Once, when she had gone into the villa and Rainaldi and I were left alone, he asked me an abrupt question as to my will. This he had seen, incidentally, when we married. He told me that as it stood, and should I die, I would leave my wife without provision. This I knew and had drawn up a will myself that would correct the error, and would have put my signature to it and had it witnessed, could I be certain

that her fault of spending was a temporary thing.

This new will, by the way, would give her the house and the estate for her lifetime only, and so to you upon her death, with the proviso that the running of the estate be left in your hands entirely. It still remains unsigned, for the reason I have told you.

Mark you, it is Rainaldi who has asked questions on the will. She does not speak of it to me. But do they speak of it together?

This matter of the will occurred in March. Admittedly I was unwell and nearly blinded with my head, and Rainaldi, bringing up the matter, may have done so in that cold calculating way of his, thinking that I might die. Possibly it is so. Possibly it is not discussed between them. I have no means of finding out. Too often now I find her eyes upon me, watchful and strange. And when I hold her, it is as though she were afraid. Afraid of what, of whom?

Two days ago I had another attack of this same fever which laid me low in March. The onset is sudden. I am seized with pains and sickness, which passes swiftly to great excitation of my brain, driving me near to violence, and I can hardly stand upon my feet for dizziness. This, in its turn, passes, and an intolerable desire for sleep comes upon me, so that I fall upon the floor or upon my bed, with no power over my limbs. I do not recollect my father being thus. The headaches, yes, and some difficulty of temperament, but not the other symptoms.

Philip, my boy, the only being in the world whom I can trust, tell me what it means, and if you can, come out to me. Say no word to any single soul. Above all, write not a word in answer, merely come.

One thought possesses me, leaving me no peace. Are they trying to poison me?

Ambrose

I did not tear it. I dug a hole for it beneath the slab of granite. I put it inside my pocket-book and buried the pocket-book deep in the dark earth. Then I smoothed the place with my hands. I walked away down the hill and through the woods to the avenue below. As I approached the house, I heard the laughter and chatter of the men as they went home from work.

I went in through the back entrance across the court, and as my feet sounded on the flags Seecombe came out to me from the steward's room with consternation on his face.

"I am glad you have come, sir," he said. "The mistress has been

asking for you this long while. Poor Don has had an accident. She is much concerned."

"An accident?" I said. "What happened?"

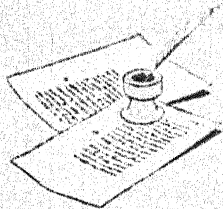
"A great slate from the roof fell on him, sir," he answered. "You know how deaf he has become of late, and how loath to leave his place in the sun, outside the library window. The slate must have fallen on his back. He cannot move."

I went to the library. Rachel was kneeling there on the floor, with Don's head pillowed in her lap. She raised her eyes when I came into the room. "They have killed him," she said. "He is dying. If you had been here, it would not have happened."

Seecombe went from the library, leaving us alone. The tears that filled her eyes ran down her face. "Don was your possession," she said. "You grew up together. I can't bear to see him die."

I went and knelt beside her on the floor, and I realized that I was thinking not of the letter buried deep beneath the granite slab, nor of poor Don so soon to die. I was thinking of one thing only. It was the first time since she had come to my house that her sorrow was not for Ambrose, but for me.

CHAPTER 19



WE SAT with Don through the long evening. I had my dinner, but Rachel would eat nothing. Shortly before midnight he died. I carried him away and covered him. Tomorrow we would bury him in the plantation. When I returned the library was empty, and Rachel had gone upstairs. I walked along the corridor to the boudoir, and she was sitting there, with wet eyes, staring into the fire. I sat beside her and took her hands. "I think he did not suffer," I said. "I think he had no pain."

"Fifteen long years," she said, "the little boy of ten who opened his birthday pie. I kept remembering the story as he lay there with his head in my lap."

"In three weeks' time," I said, "it will be the birthday once again. I shall be twenty-five."

"After your birthday," she said, "I must leave you, Philip."

"Why?" I asked.

"I have stayed too long," she answered.

"Tell me," I said. "Supposing that Ambrose had made a will leaving the property to you for your lifetime, with the proviso that during that lifetime I looked after the estate and ran it for you, what would you have done?"

"How do you mean?" she asked. "What would I have done?"

"Would you have lived here? Would you have turned me out?"

"Turned you out?" she exclaimed. "From your own home? Why, Philip, how could you ask me such a thing?"

"You would have stayed then?" I replied. "We should be living here together, just as we are doing now?"

"Yes," she said, "yes, I suppose so. I have never thought. It would be so different, though, you cannot make comparison."

"How, different?"

She gestured with her hands. "Don't you understand that my position, as it is, is untenable simply because I am a woman? It would have been quite otherwise had the house been mine and you, in a sense, in my employ. I should be Mrs. Ashley, you my heir. But now, as it has turned out, you are Philip Ashley and I, a woman relative, living on your bounty. There is a world of difference, dear, between the two."

"Exactly," I replied.

"Well, then," she said, "let's talk of it no further."

"We will talk of it further," I said, "because the matter is of supreme importance. What happened to the will?"

"What will?"

"The will that Ambrose made and never signed, in which he left the property to you?"

I saw the anxiety deepen in her eyes.

"How do you know of such a will?" she asked.

A lie would serve as an excuse, and I gave it her.

"I have always known there must be one," I answered. "I go

even further and suggest you have it here among your things."

This was a shot at venture, but it told. Her eyes flashed instinctively towards the little bureau against the wall, then back to me. "What are you trying to make me say?" she asked.

"Only confirm that it exists," I said.

She hesitated, then shrugged her shoulders. "Very well, yes, but it alters nothing. The will was never signed."

"Can I see it?" I asked.

"For what purpose, Philip?"

"For a purpose of my own. I think you can trust me."

She looked at me a long while. She was clearly bewildered and, I think, anxious, too. She rose and went towards the bureau, then, hesitant, glanced back at me. Taking a small key, she opened up a drawer. Out of the drawer she took a piece of paper and gave it to me. I took the paper to the candlelight. The writing was in Ambrose's hand, clear and firm, a stronger hand than in the letter I had read that afternoon. The date was November of a year ago, when he and Rachel had been married seven months. The paper was headed "Last Will and Testament of Ambrose Ashley." The contents were just as he had told me. The property was left to Rachel for her lifetime, passing at her death to the eldest of any children that might be born to both of them, and failing the birth of children, then to me, with the proviso that I should have the running of the same while she should live.

"May I make a copy of this?" I said to her.

"Do what you want, Philip," she said. She looked pale and listless, as if she did not care.

"I will keep it for the moment and make a copy of it," I said, and, sitting at the bureau, I took pen and paper and did so, while she lay in her chair, her cheek resting in her hand.

I knew that I must have confirmation of everything that Ambrose had told me in his letter, and though I hated every word I had to say I forced myself to question her. I scratched away with the pen; copying the will was more a pretext than anything else, and served its purpose so that I did not have to look at her.

"I see that Ambrose dated this November," I said. "Have you

any idea why he should choose that month to make a new will? You were married the preceding April."

Her answer came slowly; and I thought suddenly how a surgeon must feel when he probes about the scar of a wound but lately healed. "I don't know why he wrote it in November," she said. "We were neither of us thinking of death at that time. It was the happiest time of all the eighteen months we were together."

"And in the long run," I said, "the will was never signed."

"No," she said. "Ambrose left it as you see it now."

I had done with writing. I folded the will and the copy I had made and put both of them in my breast pocket, where earlier in the afternoon I had carried his letter. Then I went and knelt beside her chair and, putting my arms about her, held her fast; not as I would a woman, but a child.

"Rachel," I said, "why did not Ambrose sign the will?"

She lay quite still and did not move away. Only the hand that rested on my shoulder tightened suddenly.

"Tell me," I said, "tell me, Rachel."

The voice that answered me was faint and far away. "I never knew," she said; "we did not speak of it again. But I think when he realized that I could not, after all, have children he lost belief in me. Some sort of faith went, though he never knew it."

As I knelt there with my arms about her, I thought of the letter in the pocket-book beneath the granite slab, with this same accusation said in other words, and I wondered how it could be that two people who had loved could yet have such a misconception of each other and, with a common grief, could grow so far apart.

"So it was all through error that the will was never signed and put aside?" I said to her.

"Call it error if you like," she answered, "it cannot matter now. But soon afterwards he changed. Those headaches, almost blinding him, began. They drove him near to violence once or twice. I wondered how much could be my fault, and was afraid."

"And you had no friend?"

"Only Rainaldi. And he never knew what I have told you."

That cold, hard face, those narrow, searching eyes—I did not

blame Ambrose for mistrusting him. Yet how could Ambrose have been so uncertain of himself? Surely a man must know when a woman loved him? Yet possibly one could not always tell.

"And when Ambrose fell ill," I said, "you no longer asked Rainaldi to the house?"

"I dared not," she said. "You will never understand how Ambrose became, and I don't want to tell you. Please, Philip, you must not ask me any more."

"Ambrose suspected you—of what?"

"Of everything. Of infidelity, and worse than that."

"What can be worse than infidelity?"

Suddenly she pushed me away and, rising from her chair, went to the door and opened it. "Nothing," she said, "nothing in the world. Now go away and leave me to myself."

"I am sorry," I said, "I did not mean to make you angry."

"I am not angry," she answered me.

"Never again," I said, "will I ask you questions. These were the last. I give you my solemn promise."

The following day I rode early to Bodmin. I called upon an attorney there, Wilfred Tewin, who had not hitherto handled Ashley affairs. I explained that I had come upon a matter of great urgency and privacy, and that I desired him to draw up a legal document that would enable me to dispose of my entire property to my cousin, Mrs. Rachel Ashley, upon the first day of April, when it became mine by law. I showed him the will that Ambrose had not signed, and I explained to him that it was only through sudden illness, followed by death, that Ambrose had omitted to sign it. I told him to incorporate in the document much of what Ambrose had written in the will, that on Rachel's decease the property should pass back again to me, and that I should have the running of it in her lifetime. Should I die first, the property would go to my second cousins in Kent, but only at her death.

"You wish," he said, "to put in some clause safeguarding the land? As the draft stands at present, Mrs. Ashley could sell what acreage she pleased, which seems to me unwise if you desire to pass it on to your heirs in its entirety."

"Yes," I said slowly, "there had better be a clause forbidding sale. That goes, most naturally, for the house, too."

"There are family jewels, are there not," he said, "and other personal possessions? What of them?"

"They," I replied, "are hers, to do with as she pleases."

He read the draft through, and I did not think it could be faulted. "One thing," he said. "We have no proviso should Mrs. Ashley remarry. It should certainly be taken into account."

I thought suddenly of old Lord St. Ives, and the remarks that Rachel had made to me in jest. "In the case of her remarriage," I said quickly, "the property reverts to me. That is most definite."

He made a note upon the paper and read the draft again.

"You are doing a very generous thing," he said, "giving everything away the moment it is yours."

"It would never have been mine to begin with," I said, "if my cousin Ambrose Ashley had put his signature to that will."

"All the same," he said, "I doubt if such a thing has ever been done before. I gather you want nothing said of this until the day?"

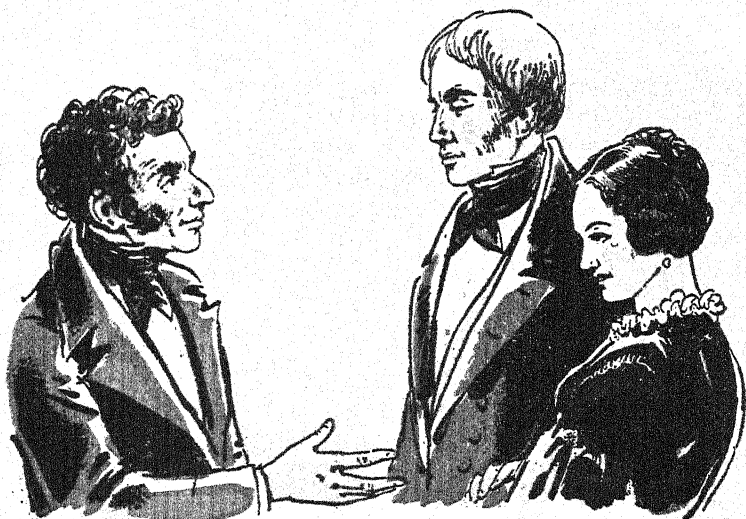
"Nothing at all. The matter is most secret."

"Very well then, Mr. Ashley. And I thank you for entrusting me with your confidence. I am at your disposal at any time."

He bowed me from the building, promising that the full document should be delivered to me on the thirty-first day of March.

I rode home with a reckless feeling in my heart. I wondered if my godfather would have apoplexy when he heard the news. I did not care. I had turned the tables on him. As for Rachel, she could not go to London now and leave her property. When I rode up to the house, I saw a post-chaise drawn up before the door. The wheels and the coach were dusty, as if from a long journey on the road, and certainly neither the vehicle nor the driver was known to me. I saw no one in the hall, but when I advanced softly towards the drawing-room I heard voices from within, behind the closed door. Just then the door opened and Rachel, laughing gaily over her shoulder, came out into the hall.

"Philip, you are home," she said. "Come into the drawing-room—this visitor of mine you shall not escape. He has travelled



very far to see us both." Smiling, she took my arm and drew me, most reluctantly, into the room. A man was seated there who rose from his chair and came towards me with his hand outstretched.

"You did not expect me," he said, "and I make my apology. But then neither did I expect you when I saw you first."

It was Rainaldi.

CHAPTER 20

I DO NOT know if I showed my feelings in my face as plainly as I felt them in my heart, but I think I must have, for Rachel passed swiftly on in conversation, telling Rainaldi that I was always without doors, riding or walking, she never knew where. "Philip works harder than his own labourers," she said.

She still kept her hand upon my arm, as though to show me off before her visitor, much as a teacher would a sullen child.

"I congratulate you upon your fine property," said Rainaldi. "I do not wonder that your cousin Rachel has become so much

attached to it. I have never seen her look so well."

"My cousin," I said, "has her origin in the west country. She has merely returned where she belonged."

He smiled, if the slight movement of his face would be so called, and addressed himself to Rachel. "It depends what tie of blood is strongest, does it not?" he said. "Your young relative forgets your mother came from Rome. And, I may add, you grow more like her every day."

"In face alone, I hope," said Rachel, "not in her figure, nor in her character. Philip, Rainaldi declares that he will put up in a hostelry, but I have told him it is nonsense. Surely we can place a room at his disposal here?"

My heart sank at the suggestion, but I could not refuse it.

"Of course," I said. "I will give orders at once, and send away the post-chaise too, as you won't want it further."

"It brought me from Exeter," said Rainaldi. "I will pay the man and then hire again when I return to London."

I went from the drawing-room to give orders for a room to be prepared and went upstairs to my room to bath myself and change for dinner. From my window I saw Rainaldi come out and pay the fellow with the post-chaise, and then with an air of appraisal he stood a moment in the carriage-way to look about him. I had the feeling that in one glance he priced the timber, and reckoned the value of the trees and shrubs. Rachel must have joined him, and I heard her laugh, and then the pair of them began talking in Italian. The front door closed. They came inside.

I had half a mind to stay up in my room and to send word to John to bring me my dinner on a tray. If they had so much to talk about they could do it better with me absent. Yet I was host and could not show discourtesy. Slowly I bathed, reluctantly I dressed, and came downstairs. Over and above the instinctive feeling of revulsion that I had about the man, I was sure that he came on no idle errand. Had Rachel known that he had arrived in England and would visit her? Rainaldi was alone in the drawing-room. He had changed from travelling clothes to dinner dress and was examining the portrait of my grandmother.

"A charming face," he said, commenting on it. "You come of a handsome family. The portrait in itself is of no great value."

"Probably not," I said. "The Lely and the Kneller are on the stairs, if you care to look at them."

"I noticed them as I came down," he answered. "The Lely is well placed, but not the Kneller. The latter, I would say, is not in his best style, but executed in one of his more florid moments. Possibly finished by a pupil." I said nothing; I was listening for Rachel's step upon the stair. "In Florence," he said, "I was able to sell an early Furini for your cousin, part of the Sangalletti collection, now unfortunately dispersed. An exquisite thing."

Rachel came into the room. She was wearing the gown she had worn on Christmas Eve, but I saw she had a shawl about her shoulders. I was glad of it.

"I was just telling your cousin Philip," said Rainaldi, "how fortunate I was to sell the Furini Madonna. But what a tragedy that it had to go."

"We are used to that, though, aren't we?" she answered him. "So many treasures that could not be saved." I found myself resenting the use of the word "we" in such a connection.

"Have you succeeded in selling the villa?" I asked bluntly.

"Not as yet," said Rainaldi. "In fact—that is partly why I came here to see your cousin—we are practically decided upon letting it for a term of some three or four years. It would be more advantageous, and to let is not so final as to sell. Your cousin may wish to return to Florence one of these days."

"I have no intention of going back as yet," said Rachel.

"No, possibly not," he replied, "but we shall see."

Secombe came in to announce dinner, and Rachel led the way across the hall into the dining-room, laughing and reminding Rainaldi of happenings in Rome. I had never felt more glum or out of place. They went on talking personalities and places, and now and again Rachel would put out her hand to me across the table, as she would to a child, and say, "You must forgive us, Philip dear. It is so long since I have seen Rainaldi," while he watched me with those dark hooded eyes and slowly smiled.

Once or twice they broke into Italian. He would be telling her something, and suddenly search for a word that would not come, and with a bow of apology to me speak in his own language. She would answer him, and as she spoke and I heard the unfamiliar words pour from her lips—so much faster surely than when we talked together in English—she became more animated and more vivid, yet harder in a sense, and with a new brilliance that I did not like so well.

"If you will excuse us, Philip," said Rachel, rising at last from her chair, "Rainaldi and I have much we must discuss, and he has papers with him that I have to sign. It will be best to do it upstairs in the boudoir. Will you join us presently?"

"I think not," I said. "I have been out all day and have letters in the office. I will wish you both good night."

She went, and he followed her. I heard them go upstairs.

I went out and walked about the grounds. I saw the light in the boudoir, but the curtains were drawn. Now they were together they would speak Italian. I wondered if she would tell him about our conversation of the preceding night, and how I had taken away the will and made a copy of it. I wondered what advice he gave to her, what papers he had brought for her to sign.

I went on walking in the grounds until I heard the clock in the belfry strike ten. That was my hour of dismissal: would it be his as well? I went and stood at the edge of the lawn and watched her window. The light was still burning in her boudoir. I watched and waited. My hands and feet grew cold. The night was dark and utterly without magic. At eleven, just after the clock struck, the light in the boudoir was extinguished and the light in the blue bedroom came on instead.

I went into the house and up to my room. I had just taken off my coat and my cravat and flung them on the chair, when I heard a soft tapping on the door. I opened it. She stood there, not yet undressed, with that same shawl about her shoulders still.

"I came to wish you good night," she said.

"Thank you," I answered. "I wish you the same."

She looked down at me and saw the mud upon my shoes.

"Where have you been all evening?" she asked.

"Out walking in the grounds," I answered her.

"Why did you not come to the boudoir for your *tisana*?"

"I did not care to do so," I replied.

"Rainaldi is a very old friend, you know that well," she said.

"We had much to talk about, surely you understand?"

"Is it because he is such an older friend than I that you permit him to linger in the boudoir until eleven?" I asked.

"Was it eleven?" she said. "I really did not realize it."

"How long is he going to stay?" I asked.

"That depends on you. If you are civil and will invite him, he will stay for perhaps three days. More is not possible. He has to return to London."

"Since you ask me to invite him, I must do so."

Rainaldi stayed, not for three days but for seven, and I found no reason to alter my opinion of him. I think what I disliked most was his air of tolerance towards me, as though I were a child to be humoured. Late one afternoon, when Rachel had gone upstairs to dress for dinner, Rainaldi said to me, "It was generous of you and your guardian to give your cousin Rachel the allowance. She wrote and told me of it. She was deeply touched."

"It was the very least the estate owed to her," I said, and hoped my tone of voice was discouraging to further conversation. I would not tell him what was going to happen in three weeks' time.

"You perhaps know," said Rainaldi, "that apart from the allowance she has no personal means whatsoever, except what I can sell for her from time to time. This change of air has done wonders for her, but I think before long she will feel the need of society, such as she has been used to in Florence. That is the real reason I do not get rid of the villa. The ties are very strong. Of course, it would possibly be wiser to sell the villa eventually and for Rachel to have a small apartment in Florence. She has so many friends who have no wish to lose her, I among them."

"You told me when we first met," I said, "that my cousin Rachel was a woman of impulse. No doubt she will continue to be so, and live where she pleases."

"No doubt," answered Rainaldi. "But the nature of her impulses has not always led her into happiness."

I suppose by this he wanted to imply that her marriage with Ambrose had been on impulse, and unhappy likewise, and that her coming to England was also impulse, and he was uncertain of the outcome of it. He had power over her because he had the management of her affairs, and it was this power that might take her back to Florence. I believed that was the purpose of his visit, and possibly to tell her also that the allowance the estate paid to her would not be sufficient to maintain her indefinitely. I had the trump card, and he did not know it. In three weeks' time she would be independent of Rainaldi for the rest of her life.

"It must be very strange, with your upbringing, suddenly to entertain a woman in the house, and for many months, as you have done," said Rainaldi. "Has it put you out at all?"

"On the contrary," I said, "I find it very pleasant."

"Strong medicine, all the same, for one young and inexperienced as yourself. Taken in so large a dose, it could do damage."

"At nearly five-and-twenty," I replied, "I think I know pretty well what medicine suits me."

"Your cousin Ambrose thought so, too, at forty-three," answered Rainaldi, "but as it turned out, he was wrong."

"Is that a word of warning or of advice?" I asked.

"Of both," he said, "if you will take it the right way. And now, if you will excuse me, I must go dress for dinner."

I suppose this was his method to drive a wedge between me and Rachel, to drop a word, hardly venomous in itself, yet with sufficient sting to foul the air.

Eventually, on the last evening of his visit, my godfather, with Louise, came to dine. The evening passed off well, or so it seemed. I saw Rainaldi putting himself to infinite trouble to be courteous to my godfather, and he, Rainaldi and Rachel somehow formed themselves into a group for conversation, leaving Louise and me to entertain ourselves. Now and again I noticed Rainaldi looking towards us, smiling with a sort of amiable indulgence, and once I even heard him say *sotto voce* to my godfather, "All my

compliments upon your daughter and your godson. They make a very charming couple." Louise heard it, too. The poor girl flushed crimson. And at once I began asking her when she was next due to visit London, which I hoped would ease her feelings, but for all I know it may have made them worse. After dinner the subject of London came up once again, and Rachel said, "I hope to visit London myself before very long. If we are there at the same time"—this to Louise—"you must show me all the sights."

My godfather pricked up his ears at her remark.

"So you are thinking of leaving the country?" he said. "Well, you have certainly endured the rigours of a winter visit to us in Cornwall very well. You will find London more amusing." He turned to Rainaldi. "You will still be there?"

"I have business there for some weeks yet," replied Rainaldi, "but if Rachel decides to come up I shall very naturally put myself at her disposal. I hope that you and your daughter will give us the pleasure of dining with us when you are there."

"We shall be very happy to," said my godfather. "London in the spring can be delightful."

I could have hit the whole bunch of heads together for the calm assumption of their meeting, but Rainaldi's use of the word "us" maddened me the most. I could see his plan. Lure her to London, entertain her there while he conducted his other business, and then prevail upon her to return to Italy. And my godfather, for his own reasons, would further such a plan.

They little knew I had a plot to fox them all. So the evening passed, with much expression of goodwill on every side, and with Rainaldi even drawing my godfather apart for the last twenty minutes, to drop more venom, I well imagined.

I could hardly swallow my breakfast the next morning in haste to hurry Rainaldi away. The wheels of the post-chaise that was to carry him to London sounded on the drive, and Rachel came down, ready dressed for gardening, to bid him good-bye.

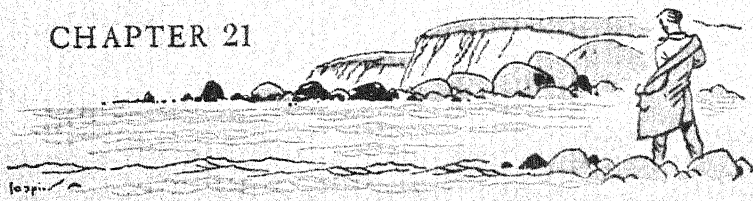
He took her hand and kissed it. This time, for the sake of common courtesy to me, his host, he spoke his adieus in English. "So you will write me your plans?" he said to her. "Remember, when

you are ready to come, I shall await you there in London."

"I shall make no plans," she said, "before the first of April." And, looking over his shoulder, she smiled at me.

"Isn't that your cousin's birthday?" said Rainaldi, climbing into the post-chaise. "I hope he enjoys it." And then he said as a parting shot to me, "It must be odd to have a birthday on so singular a date. All Fools' Day, is it not? But perhaps at twenty-five you will think yourself too old to be reminded of it." Then he was gone, the post-chaise passing down the drive to the park gates.

CHAPTER 21



THE remaining weeks of March passed very swiftly. Each day that came I felt a greater confidence in the future and grew lighter of heart. Rachel seemed to sense my mood and shared it with me.

"I have never," she said, "seen anyone so absurd about a birthday. You are like a child who finds the world magic when he wakes. What plan do you intend to make for the day itself?"

"No plan at all," I answered, "except you have to remember that the celebrator of a birthday must be granted every wish."

In point of fact, I had not thought about the events of the day itself, I only planned that she should have the document upon her breakfast tray. When the 31st of March came, however, I knew that there was something else I wished to do. I remembered the jewels and thought what a fool I was not to have recollected them before. So I had two encounters before me on that day. One with Mr. Couch and the other with my godfather.

I made certain first of Mr. Couch. I thought the packages might be too bulky to carry upon Gypsy and I did not wish to order the

carriage for fear Rachel might hear of it and express a desire to come into town. So on some unnecessary pretext I walked into town and had the groom fetch me in the dog-cart.

Mr. Couch received me as pleasantly as he had done before.

"This time," I told him, "I have come to take all away."

He looked at me in pained surprise. "You are not, Mr. Ashley," he said, "intending to remove your banking account to another establishment?"

"No, I was speaking about the family jewels. Tomorrow I shall be twenty-five, and they become my legal property. I wish to have them in my custody when I awake upon my birthday."

He must have thought me an eccentric or, at best, a little odd. "You mean," he answered, "you wish to indulge yourself in a whim for the day only?"

"Not a whim, Mr. Couch," I said. "I want the jewels at home, in my possession, and I would be much obliged if you would fetch them right away."

"Very good," he said reluctantly. "It will take a little time to get them from the vaults. If you have any other business in the town . . ."

"I have none," I interrupted. "I will wait here and take them with me." He saw there was no use in delay and, sending word to his clerk, instructed the packages to be brought. I had a carrier for the purpose, which was luckily just large enough to take the whole—as a matter of fact, it was a wicker basket that we used at home for carting cabbages, and Mr. Couch winced as he put the precious boxes into it one by one.

We drove home by the long avenue from Four Turnings, and I went into the house the back way—the servants were at dinner—and, going upstairs by their staircase, I tiptoed through to the front and to my room. I locked the vegetable basket in my wardrobe and went downstairs to eat some lunch.

No sooner had I swallowed my meal than I was off again, this time on horseback, to Pelyn. Safe in my pocket I had the document, which the attorney, Mr. Trewin, had sent to me, as he had promised, by special messenger. I also had Ambrose's will.

My godfather was at home and in his study. "Well, Philip," he said, "if I am a few hours premature, no matter. Let me wish you a happy birthday."

"Thank you," I said, "and I would also thank you, in return, for your guardianship over these past years."

"Which," he said smiling, "ends tomorrow."

"Yes," I said, "or rather, tonight at midnight. And as I do not want to rouse you from your sleep at such an hour, I would like you to witness my signature to a document I wish to sign, which will come into effect at that precise moment."

I brought the will from my breast pocket.

"First," I said, "I would like you to read this. It was not given to me willingly, but only after much argument and discussion. I had long felt such a paper must be in existence, and here it is."

I passed it to him. He placed his spectacles on his nose and read it through. "It is dated, Philip," he said, "but it is not signed."

"Quite so," I answered, "but it is in Ambrose's hand, is it not?"

"Why, yes," he replied, "undoubtedly. What I do not understand is why he never had it witnessed and sent to me."

"It would have been signed," I said, "but for his illness and for the fact that he expected, any month, to be home here and give it to you in person. That I know and my conscience tells me I have been enjoying something that is not mine by right. I want you to read this document that I have had prepared."

And I handed him the scroll that Trewin had drawn up. He read it slowly, carefully, his face becoming grave. It was only after a long while that he removed his spectacles and looked at me. "Your cousin Rachel," he said, "has no knowledge of this?"

"No knowledge whatsoever," I answered.

He sat at his desk, his eyes upon my face.

"You are quite determined upon this course?" he said to me.

"Quite," I answered him.

"You realize that it may lead to abuse, that there are few safeguards, and that the whole of the fortune due to you eventually, and to your heirs, may be dispersed?"

"Yes," I said, "and I am willing to take the risk."

He shook his head and sighed. He rose from his chair, looked out of the window, and returned to it again.

"Philip," he said, "forgive me asking you this question—personal, I know—but I have known you since birth. You are completely infatuated with your cousin, are you not?"

I felt my cheeks burn. "I don't know what you mean," I said. "Infatuation is a futile and most ugly word. I respect and honour my cousin Rachel more than anyone I know."

"I am not happy about any of this, Philip," he said. "I wish now that she had never come to England. However, it is too late to regret that. Very well then, sign. And take the consequences of your action." I seized a pen and put my name to the deed. He watched me with his still, grave face.

"There are some women, Philip," he observed, "good women very possibly, who through no fault of their own impel disaster. Whatever they touch somehow turns to tragedy. I don't know why I say this to you, but I feel I must." And then he witnessed my signature on the long scroll of paper.

"I suppose," he said, "you will not wait to see Louise?"

"I think not," I replied, and then, relenting, "if you are both at liberty tomorrow evening, why not come and dine and drink my health upon my birthday?"

He paused. "I am not certain if we are free," he said. "I will at any rate send word to you by noon." I could see plainly he had little wish to come.

I rode home, remembering my mood of high elation the last time I had done so, after visiting the attorney in Bodmin, only to find Rainaldi at home. There would be no such visitor today.

The sun was sinking beyond the westward bay, flaming the quiet sky, darkening the water, and the rounded face of the near-full moon showed plain over the eastern hills. This, I thought to myself, is how a man must feel when in a state of high intoxication, this complete abandon to the passing hour. I saw things, not in hazy fashion, but with the clarity of the very drunk. The park, as I entered it, had all the grace of fairy tale; even the cattle plodding down to drink at their trough beside the pool were beasts of

enchantment, lending themselves to beauty. I had eaten too fully at midday to be hungry, but I was thirsty and drank deep of the cool, clear water from the well. When I had bathed and changed, I found Rachel waiting for me in the dining-room.

"I smell mischief," she said at once. "You have not been home for the day. What have you been at?"

"That, Mrs. Ashley," I said to her, "is no concern of yours."

"No one has set eyes upon you since early morning," she said.

"I came home to luncheon and had no companion."

"You should have lunched with Tamlyn," I told her. "His wife is a most excellent cook and would have done you well."

"Did you go to town?" she asked.

"Why, yes, I went to town."

"And did you see anyone of our acquaintance?"

I would not answer her. I sat in my chair and smiled. "I think," I said, "that I shall go swimming after dinner. I feel all the energy of the world in myself tonight, and all the folly."

She looked at me over her glass of wine with solemn eyes.

"If," she said, "you desire to spend your birthday in your bed with a poultice on your chest, drinking black currant every hour, nursed—not by me, I warn you, but by Seecombe—go swimming, if you please. I shall not stop you."

When we had dined we went into the library, but I was in such a state of exultation that I could not rest in my chair, with longing for the night to pass.

"Philip," she said at last, "for the sake of pity, go and take your walk. Run to the beacon and back again if that will cure you. I think you have gone mad, in any case."

"If this is madness," I said, "then I would want to stay that way for always. I did not know lunacy could give such delight."

I kissed her hand and went out into the grounds. It was a night for walking, still and clear, and there was nothing about me but the light from the pale moon, making a silver track across the sea. If it was a night for walking, it was a night for swimming, too. No threat of poultices or cordials would keep me from it. I climbed down to my favourite point where the rocks jutted and, laughing

to myself at this folly most sublime, undressed and plunged into the water. God! It was icy cold. I shook myself like a dog, with chattering teeth, and struck out across the bay, returning, after a bare four minutes, back to the rocks to dress.

Madness. Worse than madness. But still I did not care, and still my mood of exultation held me in thrall. I dried myself as best I could upon my shirt and walked up through the woods, back to the house. The moonlight made a ghostly path for me, and shadows, eerie and fantastic, lurked behind the trees.

I came to the house at last and looked up at her window. It was open wide, and I could not tell if her candle burned still or if she had blown it out. I looked at my watch. It wanted five minutes to midnight. My mood of folly swept me in full force. I went and stood under the window of the blue bedroom and called up to her. I called her name three times before I had answer. She came to the open window, dressed in that white nun's robe with the full sleeves and the lace collar.

"What do you want?" she said. "I was three parts asleep."

"Will you wait there," I said, "just a few moments? I want to give you something."

I went upstairs to my room and came down again, carrying the cabbage basket. Round the handles I knotted a great piece of string. I had with me, also, the document, which I placed in my jacket pocket. She was still waiting there beside the window.

"What in the world," she called softly, "have you got carried in that basket? Now, Philip, if this is one of your practical jokes, I will not share it. Have you got crabs hidden there?"

"At any rate, I promise they won't bite. Now, catch the string." I threw up the end of the long string to the window.

"Haul away," I told her, "with both hands, mind. The basket is some weight." She pulled as she was bidden, while I stood below, watching her, shaking with silent laughter. She pulled the basket on to her window sill, and there was silence. After a moment she looked out again. "I don't trust you, Philip. These packages have odd shapes. I know they are going to bite."

For answer I began to climb up the creeper wire, hand over



hand, until I reached her window.

"Be careful," she called, "you will fall and break your neck."

In a moment I was inside the room.

"Why is your head so wet?" she said. "It is not raining."

"I've been swimming," I answered. "I told you I would do so. Now, open up the packages, or shall I do it for you?"

One candle was burning in the room. She stood with bare feet upon the floor and shivered.

"For heaven's sake," I said, "put something round you."

I seized the coverlet from the bed and threw it about her, then lifted her and put her among her blankets.

"I think," she said, "that you have gone raving mad."

"Not mad," I said, "it's only that I have become, at this minute, twenty-five. Listen." I held up my hand. The clock struck midnight. I put my hand into my pocket. "This," I said, laying the document upon the table by the candlestick, "you can read at your leisure. But the rest I want to give you now."

I emptied the packages upon the bed. I tore away the paper,

scattering the boxes, flinging the soft wrappings anywhere. Out fell the ruby head-piece and the ring. Out came the sapphires and the emeralds. Here were the pearl collar and the bracelets, all tumbling in mad confusion on the sheets. "This," I said, "is yours. And this, and this. . . ." And in an ecstasy of folly I heaped them all upon her, pressing them on her hands, her arms, her person.

"Philip," she cried, "you are out of your mind, what have you done?"

I did not answer. I took the collar and put it about her neck.

"I'm twenty-five," I said. "You heard the clock strike twelve. Nothing matters any more. All this for you. If I possessed the world, you should have it also."

I have never seen eyes more bewildered or amazed. She looked up at me and down to the scattered necklaces and bracelets and back to me again, and then, I think because I was laughing, she put her arms suddenly about me and was laughing, too. We held one another, and it was as though she caught my madness, and all the wild delight of lunacy belonged to both of us.

"And I have nothing for you," she cried, "but a gold pin for your cravat. Your birthday, and you shame me. Is there nothing else you want? Tell me, and you shall have it. Anything you ask."

I looked down at her, with all the rubies and the emeralds spread about her and the pearl collar around her neck, and all of a sudden I was serious and remembered what the collar meant.

"One thing, yes," I said, "but it isn't any use my asking it."

"Why not?" she said.

"Because," I answered, "you would box my ears and send me straight to bed."

She stared up at me and touched my cheek with her hand.

"Tell me," she said. And her voice was gentle.

I did not know how a man asks a woman to become his wife. There is generally a parent whose consent must first be given. Or if no parent, then there is courtship, there is all the give-and-take of some preceding conversation. None of this applied to her and me. And it was midnight, and talk of love and marriage had never passed between us. I remembered that morning in the gar-

den when I had told her that I asked for nothing better than my own house to comfort me.

"I told you once," I said, "that I had all the warmth and the comfort that I needed within four walls. Have you forgotten?"

"No," she said, "I have not forgotten."

"I spoke in error," I said. "I know now what I lack."

She touched my head, and the tip of my ear, and the end of my chin. "Do you?" she said. "Are you so very sure?"

"More sure," I answered, "than of anything on earth."

She looked at me. Her eyes seemed darker in the candlelight.

"You were very certain of yourself upon that morning," she said, "and stubborn, too. The warmth of houses . . ."

She reached out to snuff the candle; she was laughing still.

When I stood upon the grass at sunrise, before the servants had wakened, I wondered if any man before me had been accepted in marriage in quite so straight a fashion. It would save many a weary courtship if it was always so. Love and all its trappings had not concerned me hitherto. I had been blind, and deaf, and sleeping; now, no longer.

What happened on those first hours of my birthday will remain. If there was passion, I have forgotten it. If there was tenderness, it is with me still. Wonder is mine for ever that a woman, accepting love, has no defence. Perhaps this is the secret that they hold to bind us to them. Making reserve of it until the last.

I would not know, having no other for comparison. She was my first, and last.

CHAPTER 22

I REMEMBER the house waking to the sunlight. The dew had been heavy, and the grass was silver, as though touched with frost. A blackbird started singing, and a chaffinch followed, and soon the whole spring chorus was in song.

I went indoors and up to my room. My mind was empty, without thought. My body calm and still. It was as though everything in life was now resolved, and the way before me plain. In the

future only this: Rachel and I. A man and his wife living within themselves, the house containing us, the world outside our doors passing unheeded. Day after day, night after night, as long as we both should live.

I dressed and went down to my breakfast. Afterwards I whistled to the dogs and went out into the grounds, and, caring nothing for Tamlyn and his cherished blooms, I picked every budding camellia I set eyes upon and took them to her room.

She was sitting up in bed eating her breakfast, and before she had time to protest and draw her curtains, I had showered the camellias down upon the sheets and covered her.

"Good morning once again," I said, "and I would remind you that it is still my birthday."

"Birthday or not," she said, "it is customary to knock upon a door before you enter. Go away."

Dignity was difficult, with the camellias in her hair and on her shoulders and falling into the teacup, but I straightened my face and withdrew to the far end of the room.

"I am sorry," I said. "Since entering by window I have grown casual about doors. In fact, my manners have forsaken me."

"You had better go," she said, "before Seecombe comes up to take my tray. I think he would be shocked to see you here."

Her cool voice was a damper to my spirits, but I supposed there was logic in her remark. It was a trifle bold, perhaps, to burst in on a woman at her breakfast, even if she was to be my wife—which was something that Seecombe did not know as yet.

"I will go," I said. "Forgive me. I only want to say one thing to you. I love you."

I turned to the door and went, and I remember noticing that she no longer wore the collar of pearls. She must have taken it off after I left her in the early morning, and the jewels were not lying on the floor; all had been tidied away. But on her breakfast tray was the document that I had signed the day before.

Downstairs Seecombe awaited me. "Mr. Philip, sir," he said, "this is a very great occasion. May I take the liberty of wishing you many, many happy returns of your birthday?" I wanted to tell

him there and then that Rachel and I were to be married, I was so bursting with delight and happiness, but a certain hesitation held me back; the matter was too solemn and too delicate to thrust upon him unawares.

I went round the back to the office, in pretence of work, but all I did when I got there was to sit before my desk and stare in front of me. The peace of early morning had gone from me, and all the fever of last night was with me once again. The clock struck ten, and I heard the men moving in the yard outside the window. I looked at a sheaf of bills and put them back again, and started a business letter and tore it up again. Nat Bray, the farmer from Penhale, came in to see me with a long tale about some cattle that had strayed.

I cut the luckless fellow short and bid him good day, and told him to seek the steward's room and have a glass of ale with See-combe. "Today, Nat," I said, "I do no business, it's my birthday; I am the happiest of men," and, clapping him on the shoulder, left him open-mouthed to make what he would of my remark.

Then I thrust my head out of the window and called across the court to the kitchen and asked them to pack a luncheon basket for a picnic, for suddenly I wanted to be alone with her under the sun, with no formality of house or dining-room or silver upon a table, and this order given, I walked to the stables to tell Wellington that I wished to have Solomon saddled for the mistress.

He was not there. The coach-house door was wide and the carriage gone. The stable lad looked blank at my inquiry.

"The mistress ordered the carriage soon after ten," he said. "Where she has gone I cannot say. Perhaps to town."

My spirits, pitched so high, flagged suddenly and dropped. The day was all before us, and this was not what I had planned.

I sat about and waited. Noon came and the bell clanged out for the servants' dinner. The picnic basket was beside me. Finally, at two, I walked into the woods. The excitement of the morning had turned to apathy. I was nearly at Four Turnings when I saw the carriage. I stood waiting in the middle of the drive, and at sight of me Wellington drew rein and halted. The weight of disappointment, so heavy during the past hours, went at the glimpse of her

sitting in the carriage and, telling Wellington to drive on, I climbed in and sat opposite her on the hard narrow seat. She wore her veil down, so that I could not see her face.

"I have looked for you since eleven," I said. "Where in the world have you been?"

"To Pelyn," she said, "to see your godfather."

All the worries and perplexities, safely buried in the depths, came rushing to the fore-front of my mind.

"Why so?" I asked. "What need to go find him in such a hurry? Everything has been settled long since."

"I am not sure," she answered, "what you mean by everything."

"The document," I said. "You cannot go against it. I am legally of age. My godfather can do nothing. Everything is yours."

"Yes," she said, "I understand it now. The wording was a little obscure, that was all. So I wished to make certain."

Still that distant voice, cool and unattached, while in my memory was the other that had whispered in my ear at midnight.

"Is it clear to you now?" I said.

"Quite clear," she answered.

"Then there is nothing more to be said on the matter?"

"Nothing," she replied.

Yet there was a kind of nagging at my heart and a strange mistrust. All spontaneity was gone, the joy and laughter we had shared together when I gave her the jewels. Damn my godfather if he had said anything to hurt her. "Put up your veil," I said.

She lifted her veil, and the eyes that looked into mine were not smiling as I had hoped, or tearful as I had feared, but steady and serene and quite unmoved, the eyes of someone who has been out upon a matter of business and settled it in satisfaction.

"The Kendalls dine tonight in town," she said, "but will look in upon us afterwards before returning home. I fancy I made some progress with Louise. Her manner was not quite so frozen."

"I am glad of that," I said. "I would like you to be friends."

"In fact," she went on, "I am coming back again to my original way of thinking. She would suit you well."

She laughed, but I did not laugh with her. It was unkind, I

thought, to make a joke of poor Louise. Heaven knew I wished the girl no harm and that she might find herself a husband.

"I think," she said, "that your godfather disapproves of me, which he has a perfect right to do, but by the end of luncheon I think we understood one another very well. The tension eased, and we made more plans to meet in London."

"In London? You don't still intend to go to London?"

"Why, yes," she said, "why ever not?"

I said nothing. Certainly she had a right to go to London if she pleased. There might be shops she wished to visit, purchases to make, especially now that she had money to command, and yet . . . surely she could wait awhile, until we could go together?

"Don't let's go home immediately," I said to her. "Walk with me in the woods."

"Very well," she answered.

We stopped by the keeper's cottage and, descending from the carriage, let Wellington drive on. We took one of the paths beside the stream, which twisted upward to the hill above, and here and there were primroses in clumps beneath the trees, which she must stoop and pick. I took the primroses from her hands and put them on the ground and, spreading my coat under a tree, I asked her to sit down upon it. I took off her gloves, and kissed her hands, and put the bonnet and the veil among the primroses, and kissed the rest of her as I had wanted to do for long hours past, and once again she was without defence.

I lay there, with my head in her lap, and she ran her fingers through my hair. I shut my eyes and wished it might continue. To the end of time, nothing but that moment.

"You are wondering why I have not thanked you," she said. "There is nothing I can say. I always believed myself impulsive, but you are more so. It will take me a little time, you know, to grasp the full measure of your generosity."

"I have not been generous," I answered. "It was your due. Let me kiss you once again."

Presently she said, "I have learned one thing at least. Never to go walking with you in the woods again. Philip, let me rise."

I helped her to her feet and, with a bow, handed her the gloves and bonnet. She fumbled in her purse and brought out a small package, which she unwrapped. "Here," she said, "is your birthday present, which I should have given you before. Had I known that I was coming into a fortune, the pearl head would have been larger." She took the pin and put it in my cravat.

"Now will you permit me to go home?" she said.

She gave me her hand, and I remembered that I had eaten no lunch that day and had now a prodigious appetite for dinner. We turned along the pathway, I thinking of boiled fowl and bacon and the night to come, and suddenly we were upon the granite stone, which I had forgotten awaited us at the termination of the path. I turned swiftly to avoid it, but too late.

"What is it, Philip," she asked, "that shape there, like a tombstone, rising so suddenly out of the ground?"

"It is nothing," I said swiftly, "just a sort of landmark. There is a path here through the trees where the walking is less steep. This way, to the left. Not past the stone."

"Wait a moment," she said, "I want to look at it. I have never been this way before."

She went up to the slab and stood before it. I saw her lips move as she read the words, and I watched her in apprehension. Perhaps it was my fancy, yet it seemed to me that her body stiffened. She must have read the words twice over. Then she came back and joined me, but this time she did not take my hand; she walked alone. She made no comment on the monument, nor did I, but somehow that great slab of granite was with us as we walked. I saw the lines of doggerel, and the date beneath, and his initials, A.A., cut into the stone, and I saw also, which she could not, the pocket-book with the letter buried deep beneath the stone, in the dank earth. And I felt, in some vile fashion, that I had betrayed them both. Her very silence showed that she was moved. Unless, I thought to myself, I speak now, at this moment, the slab of granite will be a barrier between us.

"I meant to take you there before," I said, my voice sounding loud and unnatural after so long an interval. "It was the view

Ambrose liked best on the whole estate."

"But it was not," she answered, "part of your birthday plan to show it to me." The words were clipped and hard.

"No," I said quietly, "not part of the plan." And we walked along the drive without further conversation, and on entering the house she went straight to her room. I took my bath and changed my clothes, no longer light of heart but dull, despondent. What demon took us to that granite stone, what lapse of memory?

At least she knew nothing of the letter, nor would she ever know. Ambrose's illness had been upon him as he wrote. Brooding, suspicious, with the hand of death so close, he had not reckoned on his words. And suddenly, as though it danced before me on the wall, I saw the sentence, "Money, God forgive me for saying so, is, at the present time, the one way to her heart."

We sat down to dinner, with John and Seecombe waiting on us, and the full regalia of the candlesticks and the silver upon the table, and the lace napery, too, in honour of my birthday. We laughed, and smiled, and toasted ourselves, and the five-and-twenty years that lay behind me; but all the while I felt that we forced our spirits into jollity. A kind of desperation came upon me, that it was imperative to feast, to make merry, and the solution therefore was to drink more wine and fill her glass as well, so that the sharper edge of feeling could be dulled and both of us forget the granite slab and what it stood for in our inner selves.

We must have sat late, for we had not left the table when there came the sound of carriage wheels upon the drive. The bell pealed and the Kendalls were shown into the dining-room, where we were still seated amid the confusion of crumbs and dessert and half-empty glasses. I rose, unsteadily, and dragged two chairs to the table, with my godfather protesting that they had already dined and only came in for a moment to wish me good health.

Seecombe brought fresh glasses, and I saw Louise, in a blue gown, look at me, a question in her eyes, thinking, I felt instinctively, that I had had too much to drink.

We all sat down again with a buzz of conversation, my godfather, Rachel, and Louise already eased to each other's company

through the hours spent together earlier in the day; while I sat silent at my end of the table, scarce taking in a word, but turning over in my mind the announcement I had resolved to make.

At length my godfather, leaning towards me, glass in hand and smiling, said, "To your five-and-twenty years, Philip. Long life and happiness."

The three of them looked at me and—whether it was the wine I had taken, or my own full heart within me—I felt that both my godfather and Louise were dear and trusted friends. I liked them well, and Rachel, my love, with tears already in her eyes, was surely nodding her head and smiling her encouragement. I stood up and thanked them, and then with my own glass filled I said, "I, too, have a toast I wish you to drink tonight. Since this morning I have been the happiest of men. I want you, Godfather, and you, Louise, to drink to Rachel, who is to be my wife."

I drained my glass and looked down upon them, smiling. No one answered, no one moved; I saw perplexity in my godfather's expression and, turning to Rachel, I saw that her smile had gone and that she was staring at me, her face a frozen mask.

"Have you quite lost your senses, Philip?" she said.

I put my glass on the table. I was uncertain of my hand and placed it too near the edge. It shivered in fragments on the floor.

"I am sorry," I said, "if it was premature to break the news."

I gripped the table with my hands for steadiness, and there was a sound of drumming in my ears. She did not seem to understand. She looked away from me, back to my godfather and Louise.

"I think," she said, "that the birthday and the wine have gone to Philip's head. Forgive this piece of schoolboy folly, and forget it if you can. He will apologize when he is himself again. Shall we go to the drawing-room?" She rose to her feet and led the way from the room. I went on standing there, staring at the debris of the dinner table, the crumbs of bread, the spilled wine on the napery, the chairs pushed back, and there was no feeling in me, none at all, but a kind of vacuum where my heart had been. I waited awhile, and then, stumbling from the dining-room, I went into the library and sat there in the darkness beside the empty grate. It

was the fault of the wine that I had blundered. Yet why should she mind so much what I had said? We could have sworn the pair of them to secrecy. I heard Seecombe opening the front door, bidding them good night, and the wheels drive away.

My brain was clearer now. I sat and listened. I heard the rustle of her gown and then her footstep on the stair. I got up and followed her. I came upon her at the turn of the corridor.

"I thought you were gone to bed," she said. "You had better go at once, before you do more damage."

"Now that they are gone," I said, "will you forgive me? Believe me, you can trust the Kendalls. They won't give away our secret."

"Good Lord, I should hope not, since they know nothing of it," she replied. "You make me feel like a backstairs servant creeping to some attic with a groom. I have known shame before, but this is the worst." Still the white frozen face that was not hers.

"You were not ashamed last night at midnight," I said. "You gave your promise then and were not angry. I would have gone at once if you had bidden me."

"My promise?" she said. "What promise?"

"To marry me, Rachel," I answered.

She had her candlestick in her hand. She raised it, so that the naked flame showed on my face. "You dare to stand there, Philip," she said, "and bluster to me that I promised to marry you last night? You know very well I gave you no such promise."

I stared back at her. It was not I who was out of my mind, but she. I felt the colour flame into my face.

"You asked me what I wanted," I said, "as a birthday wish. Then, and now, there was only one thing in the world I could ever ask, that you should marry me. What else could I mean?"

She did not answer. She went on looking at me, incredulous, baffled, like someone listening to words in a foreign language. She had not understood what it was I asked of her at midnight, nor I, in my blind wonder, what she had given; therefore, what I had believed to be a pledge of love was something different, without meaning, on which she had put her own interpretation.

If she was shamed, then I was doubly so, that she could have

been mistaken in me. "Let me put it in plain language now," I said. "When will you marry me?"

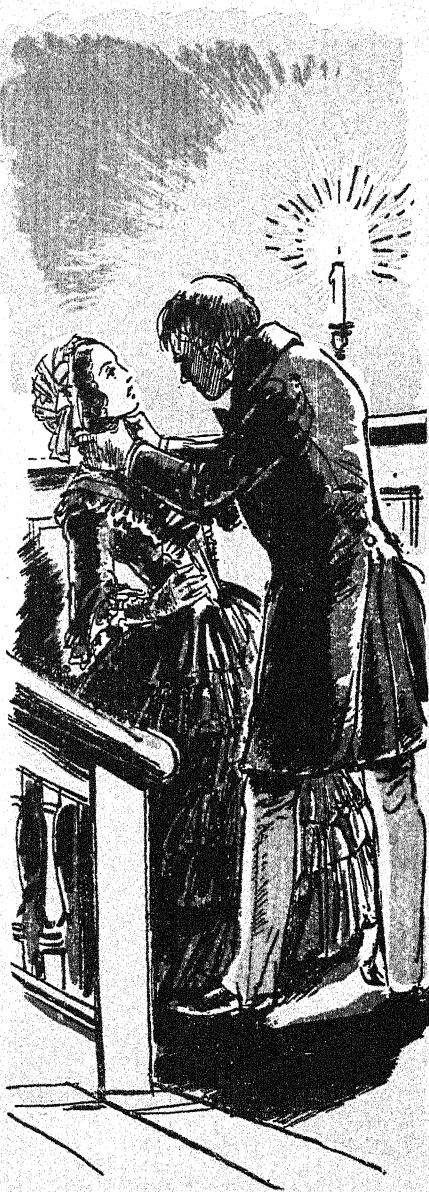
"But never, Philip," she said with a gesture of her hand, as if dismissing me. "Take that as final, and for ever. If you hoped otherwise, I am sorry. Now, good night."

She turned to go, but I seized her hand. "Do you not love me then?" I asked. "Was it pretence? Why, for God's sake, did you not tell me the truth last night?"

Once again her eyes were baffled; she did not understand. We were strangers, with no link between us. She came from another land, another race.

"Do you dare to reproach me for what happened?" she said. "I wanted to thank you, that was all. You had given me the jewels."

I think I knew, upon that instant, all that Ambrose had known, too. I knew what he had seen in her, and longed for, but had never had. Ambrose stood beside me in the shadows, under the flickering candle-light. We looked at her, tortured, without hope, while she looked back at us in accusation.



Her face was foreign, too, in the half light. Small and narrow, a face upon a coin.

"Why do you stare at me?" she whispered. "What have I done to you? Your face has changed."

I tried to think what else I had to give. She had the property, the money, and the jewels. She had my mind, my body, and my heart. Nothing remained. Unless it should be fear. I took the candle from her hand and placed it on the ledge, above the stairs. I put my hands about her throat, encircling it; and now she could not move, but watched me, her eyes wide. And it was as though I held a frightened bird in my two hands, which, with added pressure, would flutter awhile, and die, and with release would fly away to freedom.

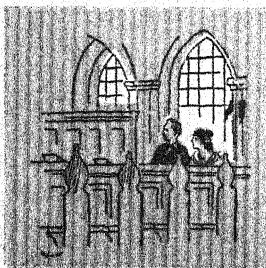
"Never leave me," I said. "Swear it, never, never."

She tried to move her lips in answer, but could not do so because of the pressure of my hands. I loosened my grasp. She backed away from me, her fingers to her throat. There were two red weals where my hands had been.

"Will you marry me now?"

She gave no answer, but walked backwards from me down the corridor to her room, her eyes upon my face, her fingers still to her throat.

CHAPTER 23



IN THE morning when I sat at breakfast, looking out upon the blustering windy day with eyes that saw nothing, Seecombe came into the dining-room with a note upon the salver. "Mr. Kendall's groom has just brought this, sir," said Seecombe. "He is waiting for an answer."

I read it through. "Dear Philip, I have been so much distressed by what occurred last night. I think I understand what you felt, more so than my father. Please remember I am your friend, and always will be. I have to go to town this morning. If you want someone to talk to, I

could meet you outside the church a little before noon. Louise."

I put the note in my pocket and asked Seecombe to bring me a piece of paper and a pen. A sleepless night, an agony of loneliness made me yearn for company. Louise was better known to me than anyone. I wrote, therefore, telling her I would be in the town that morning and would look for her outside the church.

"Give this to Mr. Kendall's groom," I said, "and tell Wellington I shall want Gypsy saddled at eleven."

There were few people about as I descended the hill into the town, and those I saw went about their business bent sideways with the wind, their faces nipped with the sudden cold. I left Gypsy at the Rose and Crown and walked up the path to the church. Louise was sheltering beneath the porch. I opened the heavy door and we went in together, to the church itself. Instinct hushed us both in the silent church, and we spoke in whispers.

"I have been unhappy about you for so long," said Louise. "But I could not tell you. You would not have listened."

"There was no need," I answered. "All had gone very well until last night. The fault was mine, in saying what I did."

"You would not have said it," she replied, "unless you had believed it to be the truth. There has been deception from the first, and you were prepared for it before she came."

"There was no deception," I said, "until the last few hours. If I was mistaken, there is no one but myself to blame."

"Why did she come here last September?" said Louise. "Why did she travel all this way to seek you out? It was not sentiment that brought her here, or idle curiosity. She came to England, and to Cornwall, for a purpose, which she has now accomplished."

I turned and looked at her. Her grey eyes were direct.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"She has the money," said Louise. "That was the plan she had in mind before she took her journey."

"You are mistaken," I said. "You know nothing about her. She is a woman of impulse and emotion, and her moods are unpredictable and strange. Impulse drove her from Florence. Emotion brought her here. She stayed because she was happy."

Louise looked at me in pity. She put her hand upon my knee. "Had you been less vulnerable," she said, "Mrs. Ashley would not have stayed. She would have called upon my father, struck a close fair bargain, and then departed. You have misunderstood her motives from the first."

I could have stood it better, I thought as I stumbled from the pew into the aisle, if Louise had struck Rachel with her hands.

"I can't sit here and listen to you," I said. "I wanted your comfort and your sympathy. If you have none to give, no matter."

She stood up beside me, catching at my arm. "Don't you see I am trying to help you?" she pleaded. "If it's not in Mrs. Ashley's nature to plan ahead, why has she been sending her allowance out of the country week by week, month by month?"

"How do you know," I said, "that she has done that?"

"My father had means of knowing," she answered. "These things could not be hidden between Mr. Couch and himself."

"Well, what if she did?" I said. "There were debts in Florence; creditors were pressing to be paid."

"From one country to another?" she said. "Is it possible? I would not have thought so. Isn't it more likely that Mrs. Ashley hoped to build up something for her return, and that she spent the winter here only because she knew you came legally into your money and your property on your twenty-fifth birthday, which was yesterday? Then, with my father no longer guardian, she could bleed you as she chose. But there was suddenly no need. You made her a present of everything you had."

I could not believe a girl I knew and trusted could have so damnable a mind and speak—that was the greatest hell—with so much logic and common sense, to tear apart another woman.

"It's no use, Louise," I said. "I am fond of you, and you of me. If we continue talking we shall hate each other."

Louise looked at me; her hand dropped from my arm.

"Do you love her, then, so much?" she said.

"I asked her to marry me," I said. "I have asked her once, and twice. I shall continue asking her."

We came to the church door, and stood in the porch again.

"When was the first time that you asked her?" said Louise.

"On the morning of my birthday," I told Louise.

"What did she answer you?" she said.

"We spoke at cross purposes," I answered. "I thought that she meant yes, when she meant no."

"Had she read the document at that time?"

"No. She read that later. Later, the same morning."

Louise fastened her mantle and pulled her hood over her hair. "She lost little time in reading it, then, and driving out to Pelyn to see my father," said Louise.

"She did not understand it very well," I said.

"She understood it when she drove away from Pelyn," said Louise. "I remember perfectly, as the carriage waited and we stood upon the steps, my father said to her, 'The remarriage clause may strike a little hard. You must remain a widow if you wish to keep your fortune.' And Mrs. Ashley smiled at him and answered, 'That suits me very well.'"

The groom came up the path, bearing the big umbrella. Louise fastened her gloves. A fresh black squall came scudding across the sky. "The clause was inserted to safeguard the estate," I said, "to prevent any squander by a stranger. If she were my wife it would not apply."

"That is where you are wrong," said Louise. "If she married you, the whole would revert to you again. You had not thought of that."

"But even so?" I said. "I would share every penny of it with her. She would not refuse to marry me because of that one clause."

The hood concealed her face, but the grey eyes looked out at me. "A wife," said Louise, "cannot send her husband's money from the country nor return to the place where she belongs. I suggest nothing."

The groom touched his hat and held the umbrella over her head. I followed her down the path and to the trap.

"I have done you no good," she said, "and you think me merciless and hard. Sometimes a woman sees more clearly than a man. Forgive me for hurting you. I only want you to be yourself again."

She leaned towards the groom. "Very well, Thomas," she said, "we will go back to Pelyn," and he turned the horse and they went away up the hill to the high road.

When I reached home I was too tired to say good afternoon to Wellington, but threw him the reins without a word, leaving him staring after me. God knows, after the night before, I had little desire to drink anything but water, but being cold and wet, I thought a taste of brandy might bring some sort of warmth to me. I went into the dining-room and John was there, laying the table for dinner. He went to fetch me a glass from the pantry, and while I waited I saw he had laid three places on the table.

On his return I pointed to them. "Why three?" I said.

"Miss Pascoe," he replied. "The mistress went calling there this morning, not long after you had gone. She brought Miss Pascoe back with her. She's come to stay."

I stared at him, bewildered. "Miss Pascoe come to stay?" I said.

"That's so," he answered. "Miss Mary Pascoe, the one that teaches in the Sunday School. We have been busy getting the pink room ready for her. She and the mistress are in the boudoir now."

Without bothering to pour the brandy, I went upstairs. There was a note upon the table in my room, Rachel's hand upon it. I tore it open. "I have asked Mary Pascoe to stay here with me in the house as a companion. After last night, I cannot be alone with you again. You may join us in the boudoir, if you wish, before and after dinner. I must ask you to be courteous. Rachel."

My first feeling was one of such intense anger that I hardly knew how to contain myself from seizing Mary Pascoe by the shoulders, and telling her to pack and begone. How had Rachel dared to invite her to my house on such a pretext, miserable, flimsy and insulting, that she could no longer be alone with me? Was I then doomed to Mary Pascoe at every meal, Mary Pascoe in the library, the drawing-room and in the grounds?

I went along the corridor—I did not change: I was still in my wet things. I opened the boudoir door. Rachel was seated in her chair, with Mary Pascoe beside her on the stool, the pair of them looking at a volume with illustrations of Italian gardens.

"So you are back?" said Rachel. "It was an odd day to choose to go out riding. The carriage was nearly blown from the road when I went down to call at the rectory. As you see, we have the good fortune to have Mary here as visitor. I am delighted."

Mary Pascoe gave a little trill of laughter.

"Such a surprise, Mr. Ashley," she said, "when your cousin came to fetch me. I can hardly believe yet I am here. And how pleasant and snug it is to sit here in the boudoir. Nicer even than below. Your cousin says it is your habit to sit here of an evening. Do you play cribbage? I am wild for cribbage. If you cannot play I shall be pleased to teach you both."

"Philip," said Rachel, "has little use for games. He prefers to sit and smoke in silence. You and I, Mary, will play together."

She looked at me, over Mary Pascoe's head. No, it was no joke. I could see by her hard eyes that she had done this thing with great deliberation. "Can I speak to you alone?" I said bluntly.

"I see no need for that," she answered. "You are at liberty to say anything you please in front of Mary."

The vicar's daughter rose hurriedly to her feet. "Oh, please," she said, "I don't wish to make intrusion. I can easily go to my room."

"Leave the doors wide open, Mary," said Rachel, "so that you can hear me if I call." Her eyes, so hostile, remained fixed on me.

"Yes, certainly, Mrs. Ashley," said Mary Pascoe. She brushed past me, her eyes goggling, leaving all the doors ajar.

"Why have you done this?" I said to Rachel.

"You know perfectly well; I told you in my note."

"How long is she to stay?"

"As long as I choose. At least I feel some measure of security with her in the house. Also, it was time. Things could not have continued as they had been, not after your outburst at the table."

"Rachel," I said, "this can't be settled in a moment's conversation with the doors open. I beg of you, listen to me, let me talk to you alone after dinner, when Mary Pascoe goes to bed."

"You threatened me last night," she said. "Once was enough. You can go now, if you wish. Or stay and play cribbage here with Mary Pascoe." She turned again to the book of gardens.

I went from the room. This, then, was my punishment for that brief moment of the night before, when I had put my hands about her neck. The action, instantly repented and regretted, was unforgivable. As quickly as my anger had come, it went, turning with heavy dullness to despair. Oh, God, what had I done?

Presently, as I stood in my room, I heard their voices approach the stair, and then the sweep of gowns descending. It was later than I thought; they must be ready dressed for dinner. I knew I could not face the business of sitting with them. Anyway, I was not hungry; I felt cold and stiff, probably I had taken chill and would be better in my room. I rang the bell and told John to make my apologies, but I would not be down to dinner.

I undressed and got into my bed. Undoubtedly I must have caught some sort of chill. The sheets seemed bitter cold, and I threw them off and got between the blankets. I felt stiff and numb and my head throbbed, things most unusual and unknown.

Some time after eight o'clock I heard them come upstairs. I sat up in bed and put my jacket round my shoulders. This, perhaps, was the moment she would choose. In spite of the rough blankets I was still cold, and the stiff pain that was about my legs and neck shifted in full measure to my head, so that it seemed on fire.

I waited, but she did not come. They must be sitting in the boudoir. I heard the clock strike nine, then ten, then eleven.

I went along the corridor to Rachel's room. I put my hand upon the handle of the door and turned it. It was locked. I knocked, very softly. She did not answer. I went slowly back to my room and to my bed, and lay there, icy cold.

I remember in the morning that I dressed, but I have no recollection of John coming in to call me, nor that I breakfasted, nor of anything at all, but only the strange stiffness in my neck and the agonizing pain in my head. Some time after midday Seecombe came to find me in the estate office to tell me the ladies were awaiting luncheon. I said I wanted none. He looked into my face.

"Mr. Philip," he said, "you are ill. What is it?"

"I don't know," I said. He took my hand and felt it. He went out of the office, and I heard him hurrying across the courtyard.

Presently the door opened once again. Rachel stood there, with Mary Pascoe behind her and Seecombe also. She came towards me.

"Seecombe says you are ill," she said to me. "What is the matter?" I stared up at her. Nothing that was happening was real.

"When will you send her home?" I said. "I won't do anything to harm you. I give you my word of honour."

She put her hand on my head. She looked into my eyes. She turned swiftly to Seecombe. "Help Mr. Ashley to bed," she said. "Tell Wellington to send the groom for the doctor. . . ."

Back in my bed again, I was aware that Seecombe was closing the shutters. Possibly the darkness would ease the blinding pain. I could not move my head upon the pillow; it was as though the muscles of my neck were taut and rigid. I felt her hand in mine. I said again, "I promise not to harm you. Send her home."

She answered, "Don't talk now. Only lie still."

The room was full of whispers. The door opening, shutting, opening once again. Soft footsteps creeping on the floor. Chinks of light coming from the landing, and always this furtiveness of whispers, so that it seemed to me, in the sudden sharp delirium that must be sweeping me, that the house was filled with people, a guest in every room, and that the house itself was not large enough to contain them; they stood shoulder to shoulder in the drawing-room and in the library, with Rachel moving in the midst of them, smiling, talking, holding out her hands. I kept repeating over and over again, "Send them away."

Then I saw the round spectacled face of Dr. Gilbert looking down on me. I had scarce seen him since I was a lad.

"So you went swimming in the sea at midnight?" he said to me. "That was a very foolish thing to do." He shook his head at me as if I were still a child, and stroked his beard. I closed my eyes against the light. I heard Rachel say to him, "I know too much about this kind of fever to be mistaken. I have seen children die of it in Florence. It attacks the spine, and then the brain. Do something, for heaven's sake. . . ."

They went away. And once again the whispering began. This was followed by the sound of wheels on the drive, and a departing

carriage. Later I heard someone breathing close to the curtains of my bed. I knew then what had happened. Rachel had gone. She had driven to Bodmin, to take the coach for London. She had left Mary Pascoe in the house to watch me. The servants, Seecombe, John, they had all departed; no one was left but Mary Pascoe.

"Please go," I said, "I need no one."

Then I heard Rachel whisper in my ear, "Dear, lie still. You will be better by and by."

I tried to turn, but could not. Had she not gone to London after all? I said, "Don't leave me. Promise not to leave me."

She said, "I promise. I will be with you all the time."

I opened my eyes, but I could not see her; the room was in darkness. The shape of it was different, not the bedroom that I knew. It was long and narrow, like a cell. The bedstead hard, like iron. There was one candle burning somewhere behind a screen. In a niche, on the wall opposite, knelt a Madonna. I called loudly, "Rachel . . . Rachel. . . ."

CHAPTER 24

THE FIRST thing that I noticed was that the tree outside my window was in leaf. I looked at it, puzzled. When I had gone to bed the buds were barely formed. It was very strange. There was no pain now in my head and the stiffness had all gone. I must have slept for many hours, possibly a day or more.

My face felt scrubby—I must be in need of a shave. I put my hand up to my chin. Now this was madness, for I had a beard. I turned my head and saw Rachel sitting in a chair near my bed—her own chair from the boudoir. She did not know I saw her.

I put my hand up to my chin again and felt the beard. Suddenly I laughed, and at the sound she raised her head and looked at me.

"Philip," she said, and smiled; and suddenly she was kneeling by my side, with her arms about me.

"I have grown a beard," I said. I could not stop myself from laughing, and from laughing turned to coughing, and at once she had a glass of some ill-tasting stuff which she made me drink, hold-

ing it to my lips. This gesture struck a chord in memory. Surely, for a long while, there had been a hand with a glass, making me drink, that had come into my dreams and gone again? I had believed it to be Mary Pascoe and kept pushing it away. I lay staring at Rachel and put out my hand to her.

Presently I said, "Did you send Mary Pascoe away?"

I heard her catch her breath and, glancing up, I saw that her smile had gone and a shadow had come to her eyes.

"She has been gone these five weeks," she said. "Never mind that now. Are you thirsty? I have made you a cool drink with fresh limes sent down from London." I drank, and it tasted good after the bitter medicine she had given me.

"I think I must have been ill," I said to her.

"You nearly died," she answered.

"What was the matter with me?"

"I have small regard for your English doctors. On the Continent we call that illness *méningite*, which here no one knew anything about. That you are alive today is little short of a miracle."

"What pulled me through?"

She smiled and held my hand the tighter. "I think your own horse strength," she answered me, "and certain things I bade them do. Making a puncture on your spine to take the fluid was but one. Also letting into your blood stream a serum made from the juice of herbs. They called it poison. But you have survived."

"Why is the tree in leaf outside my window?" I asked.

"It should be, in the second week of May," she said.

That I had lain there knowing nothing all those weeks was hard to understand. Nor could I remember the events that had brought me to my bed. Rachel had been angry with me and had invited Mary Pascoe to the house, I knew not why. That we had been married the day before my birthday was very certain, though I had no clear vision of the church, or of the ceremony.

The days of convalescence were pleasant indeed. Rachel was always with me. We did not talk much, because I found conversation tired me and brought back some shadow of that aching head. When my legs were stronger, I walked to the boudoir and our

meals were taken there, Rachel caring for me like a nurse with a child; indeed, I said to her on one occasion, if she was doomed to a sick husband for the rest of her life, she had no one to blame but herself. She looked at me strangely when I said this, and was about to speak, then paused and passed on to something else.

I remembered that for some reason or other our marriage had been kept secret from the servants, I think to allow the full twelve months to lapse since Ambrose died before announcing it. In two months' time we could declare it to the world; until then I would be patient. Each day I think I loved her more; and she, more gentle and more tender than ever in the past months of winter.

I was amazed, when I came downstairs for the first time and went out into the grounds, to see how much had been achieved about the place during my sickness. The terrace walk was now completed, and the sunken garden beside it had now been hollowed away to a great depth and was ready to be paved with stone.

Tamlyn escorted me with pride to the plantation—Rachel had called in to see his wife at the nearby cottage—and though the camellias were over, the rhododendrons were still in bloom, and the orange berberis and, leaning to the field below, the soft yellow flowers of the laburnum trees hung in clusters.

"We'll have to shift them, though, another year," said Tamlyn. "At the rate they're growing the branches lean down too far to the field, and the seeds will kill the cattle." He reached up to a branch, and where the flowers had fallen the pods were already forming, with the little seeds within. "There was a fellow the other side of St. Austell who died eating these," said Tamlyn, and he threw the pod away over his shoulder.

"There was a fine tree of this kind," I said, "in Florence, where Mrs. Ashley had her villa."

"Yes, sir?" he said. "Well, they grow most things in that climate, I understand. It must be a wonderful place. I can understand the mistress wishing to return."

"I don't think she has any intention of returning," I replied.

"I'm glad of that, sir," he said, "but we heard different. That she was only waiting to see you restored to health."

That evening, when we were sitting in the boudoir and I was drinking my *tisana*, as had become my custom before going to bed, I said to her, "There is fresh gossip round the countryside."

"What now?" she asked, lifting her head to look at me.

"Why, that you are going back to Florence," I replied.

She did not answer me at once, but bent her head again to her embroidery. "There is plenty of time to decide about these things," she said. "First, you must get well and strong."

I was silent. I did not want to hurt her, but the thought of having the two homes was not one that pleased me very well. In fact, I hated the very image of that villa.

"Would you want to spend the winter there?" I asked.

"Possibly," she said, "or the late summer; but there is no necessity to talk of it."

"I have been idle too long," I said. "I don't think I should leave this place without attention for the winter, or, in fact, be absent from it at all."

"Probably not," she said. "In fact, I would not care to leave the property unless you were in charge. You might like to pay me a visit in the spring, and I could show you Florence."

The illness I had suffered had left me very slow of understanding; nothing of what she said made any sense.

"Pay you a visit?" I said. "Is that how you propose that we should live? Absent from one another for long months at a time?"

She laid down her work and looked at me. There was something of anxiety in her eyes, a shadow on her face.

"I have my villa," she said, "and many friends, and a life out there. I have been in England for eight months and now feel the need for change again. Be reasonable, and try to understand."

"I suppose," I said slowly, "I am very selfish. I had not thought of it." I must make up my mind, then, to the fact that she would want to divide her time between England and Italy, in which case I must do the same, and start looking for a bailiff to put in charge of the estate. The idea of separation was preposterous. "My godfather may know of someone," I said, thinking aloud.

"Someone for what?" she asked.

"Why, to take over here when we are absent," I replied.

Again the shadow on her face, the apprehension in her eye.

"Never mind that now," she said, "and look, past nine o'clock, later than you have been as yet. Shall I ring for John, or can you manage alone?"

"Ring for no one," I said. I got up slowly from my chair, for my limbs were still most damnably weak, and I went and knelt beside her and put my arms about her.

"I find it very hard," I said, "the solitude of my own room, and you so close along the corridor. Can we not tell them soon?"

"Tell them what?" she said.

"That we are married," I replied.

She sat very still in my arms and did not move. It was almost as if she had turned rigid, like something without life.

"Oh, God. . . ." she whispered. Then she put her hands upon my shoulders and looked into my face. "What do you mean, Philip?" she said.

A pulse somewhere in my head began to beat, like an echo to the pain that had been there the past weeks. It throbbed deeper, ever deeper, and with it came a sense of fear.

"Tell the servants," I said. "Then it will be right and natural for me to stay with you, because we are married. . . ." But my voice sank away to nothing because of the expression in her eyes.

"But we are not married, Philip dear," she said.

Something seemed to burst inside my head.

"We are married," I said. "Of course we are married. It happened on my birthday. Have you forgotten?"

But when had it happened? Where was the church? Who was the minister? All the throbbing pain returned again, and the room swung round about me. "Tell me it's true," I said to her.

Then I knew that all was fantasy, the happiness, that had been mine for the past weeks, imagination. The dream was broken.

I buried my head against her, sobbing; tears had never come from me like this before, not even as a child. She held me close, her hand stroking my hair, and never speaking. Presently I won command over myself again and lay down in the chair, exhausted.

"It would have been better," I said, "had you let me die."

She sighed and laid her hand against my cheek. "If you say that," she answered, "you destroy me, too. You are unhappy now because you are still weak. But presently, when you are stronger, none of this will seem important. Nothing is so much changed from what it was. As to the money. . . ." She paused.

"What money?" I said.

"The money for the property," she went on. "All that will be placed on a proper footing, and you shall have enough to run the estate without loss, while I take what I need out of the country. It is all in process of arrangement now."

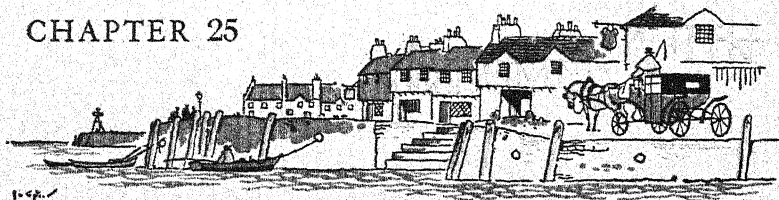
She could take every farthing for all I cared. What had any of this to do with what I felt for her? But she went on talking.

"You must continue to make what improvements you feel justified in doing," she said rapidly. "You know I shall query nothing; you need not even send me the bills. Your godfather will always be near to give advice. In a little while everything will seem to you just the same as it was before I came."

The room was deep in twilight now. I could not even see her face. "Do you really believe that?" I said to her.

She did not answer at once. She searched for some excuse for my existence, to pile upon those that she had given me already. There was none, and she knew it. She gave me her hand. "I must believe it," she said, "or I would have no peace of mind."

CHAPTER 25



WE DID NOT speak again of her departure. It was a bogey, thrust into the background by us both. For her sake I strove to appear light-hearted, without care. She did the same for me.

The summer weather was about us, and I soon grew strong again, at least to all appearances; but sometimes the pain in my head returned again, not with its full force, but stabbing, without warning, and for no good reason.

It seemed to me, though she said nothing, that Rachel planned the first steps towards departure. I would find her, of an evening, sorting through her books, arranging them as people do who wish to make a choice between the volumes they take with them and those they leave behind. Another time she would be sitting at the bureau, putting her papers into order, filling the waste-paper basket with torn scraps and discarded letters, and tying up the rest with bands of tape. All this would stop, once I came into the boudoir, and going to her chair, she would take up her work or sit beside the window; but I was not deceived. Why the sudden desire for making all things straight, unless she was soon to leave?

Another thing was that she started to go out driving in the morning, which she had not done before. She would tell me she had shopping she wished to do, and business at the bank. These things were possible. I should have thought one journey would have settled them. But three mornings in one week followed upon each other, and now yet again, in the week that was upon us, twice she had driven into town. "You have," I said to her, "the devil of a lot of shopping of a sudden, and business, too. . . ."

"I would have done it all before," she answered, "but could not do so all the weeks that you were ill."

"Do you meet anyone as you go about the town?"

"Why, no, not in particular. Yes, now I think of it, I saw Belinda Pascoe and the curate to whom she is engaged."

The next time she ordered the carriage the groom did not go. Wellington drove her alone. It seemed that Jimmy had the ear-ache. I found him sitting in the stable, nursing his injured ear. "You must ask the mistress for some oil," I said to him.

"Yes, sir," he said, disconsolate, "she promised to see to it for me by and by on her return. I think I caught cold in it yesterday. There was a fresh wind blowing on the quay."

"What were you doing on the quay?" I asked.

"We were waiting a long while for the mistress," he answered, "so Mr. Wellington thought best to bait the horses in the Rose and Crown, and he let me go off and watch the boats in the harbour."

"Was the mistress shopping, then, all afternoon?" I asked.

"No, sir," he replied, "she didn't shop at all. She was in the parlour at the Rose and Crown, the same as always."

I stared at him in disbelief. Rachel in the parlour of the Rose and Crown? Did she sit taking tea with the landlord and his wife? For a moment I thought to question him further, then decided against it. I said nothing on her return, but merely asked her if she had passed a pleasant afternoon, and she replied she had.

The following day she did not order the carriage. She told me at luncheon that she had letters to write and went up to her boudoir. I said I had to walk to Coombe to see the farmer there, which was true enough, and so I did. But I went farther. Into the town itself. I leaned over the harbour wall near to the quay and saw some boys fishing from a boat. Presently they sculled towards the steps and clambered out. One of them I recognized. It was the lad who helped behind the bar in the Rose and Crown. He had three or four fine bass on a piece of string.

"You've done well," I said. "Are they for supper?"

"Not for me, sir." He grinned. "They'll be welcome at the inn, though, I'll be bound."

"Do you serve bass now with the cider?" I asked.

"No," he said, "this fish is for the gentleman in the parlour. He had a piece of salmon yesterday from up the river."

A gentleman in the parlour. I pulled some silver from my pocket. "Well," I said, "I hope he pays you well. Here's this for luck. Who is your visitor?"

He screwed his face into another grin. "Don't know his name, sir," he replied. "Italian, they say he is. From foreign parts."

I glanced at my watch. It was after three o'clock. No doubt the gentleman from foreign parts would dine at five. I walked through the town and down the narrow alleyway to the boat-house where Ambrose had kept his sails and gear for the sailing boat he used to use. The small pram was made fast to the dock. I pulled in the

pram and climbed down into it, then paddled out into the harbour and lay off a little distance from the quay, where I could watch the entrance of the *Rose and Crown*. An hour passed. The church clock struck four. Still I waited. At a quarter before five I saw the wife of the landlord come out of the parlour entrance and look about her. Then, ten minutes after five, I saw a boat approaching the town steps, pulled by a lusty fellow in the bows. A man with a broad-brimmed hat upon his head was seated in the stern. They came to the steps. The man climbed out and gave the fellow money, then turned towards the inn. It was Rainaldi.

I pulled back to the boat-house, made the boat fast, walked through the town, and up the rope walk to the cliffs. I think I covered the four miles to home in forty minutes. Rachel was in the library waiting for me. Dinner had been put back because I had not come. She came towards me, anxious.

"At last you have returned," she said. "I have been very worried. Where were you, then?"

"Out rowing in the harbour," I answered her. "Far better on the water than inside the *Rose and Crown*."

The startled shock that came into her eyes was all I needed for the final proof. "All right, I know your secret," I continued. "Don't think up any lies."

Seecombe came in to ask if he should serve dinner.

"Do so, at once," I said, "I shall not change."

As soon as dinner was over, which we had barely tasted, Rachel rose to her feet and went straight upstairs. I followed her. When she came to the door of the boudoir she would have closed it against me, but I was too quick for her and stood inside the room, with my back against it. The look of apprehension came to her eyes again. She went away from me and stood by the mantel. "How long has Rainaldi been at the *Rose and Crown*?"

"That is my business," she replied.

"Mine also. Answer me," I said.

I think she saw there was no hope to keep me quiet or fob me off with fables. "Very well then, for the past two weeks."

"Why is he here?" I said.

"Because I asked him. Because he is my friend. Because I needed his advice and, knowing your dislike, could not ask him to this house."

"Why should you need his advice?"

"That, again, is my business. Not yours. Stop behaving like a child, Philip, and have some understanding."

I was glad to see her so distressed. It showed she was at fault.

"You ask me to have understanding," I said. "Do you expect me to understand deceit? You have been lying every day to me for the past two weeks and cannot deny it."

"If I have deceived you, it was not willingly. I did it for your sake only. You hate Rainaldi. If you had known I was meeting him, this scene would have come the sooner and you would have been ill in consequence. Oh, God—must I go through this all again? First with Ambrose, and now with you?" Her face was white and strained, but whether from fear or anger, it was hard to tell. I stood with my back against the door and watched her.

"Yes," I said, "I hate Rainaldi, as did Ambrose. And with reason."

"What reason, for pity's sake?"

"He is in love with you. And has been, now, for years."

"What utter nonsense. . . ." She paced up and down the little room, from the fireplace to the window, her hands clasped in front of her. "Here is a man who has stood beside me through every trial. Who has never misjudged me or tried to see me as other than I am. He knows my faults, my weaknesses, and does not condemn them. Without his help, through all the years that I have known him—years of which you know nothing—I would have been lost indeed. Rainaldi is my friend. My only friend."

She paused and looked at me. No doubt it was the truth, or so distorted in her mind that, to her, it became so. It made no difference to my judging of Rainaldi.

"Send him away, back where he belongs," I said.

"He will go when he is ready," she replied, "but if I need him he will stay. Indeed, if you try and threaten me again I will have him in this house as my protector."

"You would not dare," I said.

"Dare? Why not? The house is mine."

So we had come to battle. Her words were a challenge that I could not meet. Her woman's brain worked differently from mine. All argument was fair, all blows were foul.

Then, tears coming to her eyes, she looked at me and said, "A woman can't suffer twice. I have had all this before." And lifting her fingers to her throat, she added, "Even the hands around my neck. That, too. Now will you understand?"

I looked over her head, straight at the portrait above the mantel-piece, and the young face of Ambrose staring at me was my own. She had defeated both of us. "Yes," I said, "I understand. If you want to see Rainaldi, ask him here. I would rather that than that you crept to meet him at the Rose and Crown."

And I left her in the boudoir and went back to my room.

Next day he came to dinner. He seemed greatly at his ease and offered me his hand. "I hope you are recovered," he said in greeting me. "In fact, I think you look better than I expected. All the reports I had of you were bad. Rachel was much concerned."

"Indeed, I am very well," I said to him.

I asked him to sit down and he did so, smiling a little as he looked about him. "No alterations to this room as yet?" he said. "Perhaps Rachel intends to leave it so, as giving atmosphere. Just as well. The money can be better spent on other things. She tells me much has been already done about the grounds. Knowing Rachel, I can well believe it. But I must see first, before I give approval. I regard myself as a trustee to hold a balance."

He took a thin cigar from his case and lit it, still smiling as he did so. "I had a letter to you, written in London," he said, "after you made over your estate, and would have sent it, but that I had the news of your illness. There was little in the letter that I can't say now to your face. It was merely thanking you, for Rachel's sake, and assuring you that I would take great care to see there was no great loss to you in the transaction. I shall watch all expenditure. Eventually you will find we shall hand the property back to you with double value. However, that's in the distant

future. And you by that time, no doubt, with grown sons of your own. Rachel and myself, old people in wheel chairs." He laughed and smiled at me again. "And how is the charming Miss Louise?"

I told him I believed that she was well. I watched him smoking his cigar and thought how smooth his hands were for a man. They had a kind of feminine quality that did not fit in with the rest of him, and the great ring on his little finger was out of place.

"When do you go back to Florence?" I asked him.

He flicked the ash that had fallen on his coat. "It depends on Rachel," he said. "I return to London to settle my business there, and then shall either go home ahead of her, to prepare the villa, or wait and travel with her. You know that she intends to go?"

"Yes," I answered.

Rachel came into the room; and as she gave her hand to him, which he took and kissed, she made him welcome in Italian. Perhaps it was watching them at dinner, I do not know—his eyes that never left her face, her smile, her change of manner with him—but I felt, rising within me, a sort of nausea. The food I ate tasted of dust. Even the *tisana*, which she made for the three of us to drink when dinner was over, had a bitter unaccustomed tang. I left them sitting in the garden and went up to my room. As soon as I had gone I heard their voices break into Italian. I sat in the chair by my window, where I had sat during those first days and weeks of convalescence, and she beside me; and it was as though the whole world had turned evil and, of a sudden, sour.

That night fever returned to me. Not with the old force, but something similar. In the morning I was too giddy to stand and was obliged to go back to bed again. The doctor was sent for, and I wondered if the whole miserable business of my illness was to set in again. He pronounced my liver out of order and left medicine. But when Rachel came to sit with me in the afternoon, it seemed to me she had upon her face a kind of weariness. I could imagine the thought within her, "Is it going to start again? Am I doomed to sit here as a nurse to all eternity?"

She had a book in her hands, which she did not read, and her presence in the chair beside me seemed to hold a mute reproach.

"If you have other things to do," I said at last, "don't sit with me."

"What else do you suppose I have to do?" she answered.

"You might wish to see Rainaldi."

"He has gone," she said.

My heart was the lighter for the news. I was almost well.

"He has returned to London?" I inquired.

"No," she answered, "matters of greater urgency attended him at home, and he sailed from Plymouth early this morning."

My relief was so intense that I had to turn away my head lest I showed it in my face and so increased her irritation.

"When will you follow him?"

"It depends on you," she answered.

That night I dreamed I climbed to the granite stone and read the letter once again, buried beneath it. The dream was so vivid that it did not fade with waking. I got up and was well enough to go downstairs by midday. Try as I would, I could not shake off the desire to read the letter once again. I must know, for certainty, what it was Ambrose had said of Rainaldi. In the afternoon Rachel went to her room to rest, and as soon as she had gone I slipped away through the woods and climbed the path above the keeper's cottage, filled with loathing for what I meant to do. I knelt beside the granite slab and, digging with my hands, felt suddenly the soggy leather of my pocket-book. Opening it, I took out the crumpled letter. The paper was damp and limp, the lettering more faded than before, but still decipherable. The passages about Rainaldi I read over and over:

I believe this man to have a pernicious influence upon her. I suspect him of having been in love with her for years, even when Sangalletti was alive. . . . There is a shadow in her eye, a tone in her voice, when his name is said that awakens in my mind the most terrible suspicion. . . .

Mark you, it is Rainaldi who has asked questions on the will. She does not speak of it to me. But do they speak of it together?

This matter of the will occurred in March. Admittedly I was unwell and nearly blinded with my head, and Rainaldi, bringing

up the matter, may have done so in that cold calculating way of his, thinking that I might die. Possibly it is so. Possibly it is not discussed between them. I have no means of finding out. Too often now I find her eyes upon me, watchful and strange. . . .

I did not put the letter back into the pocket-book. I tore it into tiny shreds and ground them into the earth with my heel. Each shred was scattered, and then ground, in a separate place.

Then I walked home. It seemed like a postscript to the letter, that when I entered the hall Seecombe was just bringing in the post-bag that the boy had fetched from town. He waited while I unlocked it, and there, amidst the few there were for me, was one to Rachel, with the Plymouth mark upon it. I needed but to glance at the thin spidery hand to know that it was from Rainaldi. There was nothing for it but to give it him to take up to Rachel.

It was ironic, too, that when I went up to her a little later, saying nothing of my walk or where I had been, all her sharpness with me seemed to have gone. She held out her arms to me, and smiled, and asked me how I felt and if I was rested. She said nothing of the letter she had received.

After dinner we went up to her boudoir. She prepared the *tisana*, as usual, and set it down in its cup on the table by my side, and hers as well. On the bureau lay Rainaldi's letter, half covered by her handkerchief. My eyes were drawn towards it, fascinated. Would an Italian, writing to the woman he loved, keep to formality? Or, setting sail from Plymouth, with the prospect of a few weeks' separation, would he turn to indiscretion and permit himself the licence of spilling love on paper?

"Philip," said Rachel, "you keep your eyes fixed on one corner of the room as though you saw a ghost. What is the matter?"

"Nothing," I said. And for the first time lied, as I knelt beside her, pretending an urgency of longing and of love, so that her questions might be stilled and that she would forget the letter lying on the desk and leave it there.

Late that night, long after midnight, when I knew she slept—for, standing in her room with a lighted candle, I looked down on

her and saw that it was so—I went back into the boudoir. The handkerchief was still there, the letter gone. I looked in the fire; no ashes in the grate. I opened the drawers of the bureau, and there were her papers all in order, but not the letter. It was not in the pigeon-holes, nor in the little drawers beside them. There remained only one drawer, and that was locked. I went back to the bedroom, took the bunch of keys from her bedside table and tried the smallest. It fitted. The drawer opened. I put in my hand and pulled out an envelope, but as I did so my tense excitement turned to disappointment, for it was not Rainaldi's letter. It was just an envelope, containing pods, with seeds. The seeds ran from the pods on to my hands and spilled upon the floor. They were very small and green. They were the same as those that Tamlyn had thrown over his shoulder in the plantation and that had also covered the court in the Villa Sangalletti, which the servant there had swept away.

They were laburnum seeds, poisonous to cattle and to men.



CHAPTER 26

I PUT the envelope back into the drawer. I turned the key. I took the bunch of keys and replaced it on the bedside table. I did not look at her as she lay sleeping.

I think I was calmer than I had been for many weeks. I went downstairs, with a lighted candle, and into the pantry. On the table near the washing-sink stood the tray with two cups upon it from which we had drunk our *tisana*. The dregs lay in both cups. I examined both of them by candlelight. They looked the same. I put my little finger into the dregs, first hers, then mine, and tasted. Was there a difference? It was hard to tell. It might be that the dregs from my cup were just a little thicker, but I could not swear to it. I went again upstairs to my room.

I undressed and went to bed. As I lay there in the darkness I was not aware of anger or of fear. Only compassion. I saw her as someone not responsible for what she did. Compelled by the man who had power over her, lacking, through fault of circumstance and birth, in some deep moral sense, she was capable by instinct and by impulse of this final act. I believed that, in her strange way, she had loved us both, Ambrose and me, but we had become dispensable. Something other than blind emotion directed her actions after all. Perhaps she was two persons, torn in two, first one having sway and then the other. I did not know. Louise would say that she had been the second always. That from the very first every thought, every move, had some premeditation.

What a woman has once done without detection, she can do twice. And rid herself of yet another burden.

The contents of Ambrose's letter mattered little to me now. I did not think so much of them as of the last scrap that he wrote, dismissed by Rainaldi, and by Nick Kendall, too, as being the final utterance of a brain diseased. "She has done for me at last, Rachel my torment."

I was the only one to know he spoke the truth.

I was back again, then, where I had been before. I had returned

to the bridge beside the Arno, where I had sworn an oath. Perhaps, after all, an oath was something that could not be forsworn, that had to be fulfilled in time. And the time was come. . . .

Next day was Sunday. Like all the Sundays past, since she had been a visitor to the house, the carriage came to take us both to church. The day was fine and warm. It was full summer. She wore a new dark gown of thin light stuff, and a straw bonnet, and carried a parasol. When I took my seat beside her and we drove off through the park, she put her hand in mine.

In church her face was serene and happy. I wished that I could hate her, as I had hated her for many months, unseen. Yet I could feel nothing now but this strange, terrible compassion.

When the choir had departed, Rachel whispered to me, "I believe we should ask the Kendalls and the Pascoes to dine today, as we used to do. It has been so long, and they will grow offended."

I thought a moment and then nodded briefly. It would be better so. Their company would help to bridge the gulf between us, and occupied in conversation with the guests, used to my silence on these occasions, she would have no time to look at me and wonder. Outside the church, the Pascoes needed no persuasion, the Kendalls rather more. "I shall be obliged to leave you," said my godfather, "immediately we have dined, but the carriage can return again to fetch Louise."

"Mr. Pascoe has to preach again at evensong," interrupted the vicar's wife. "We can take you back with us." They fell into elaborate plans of transportation, and while they were thus talking, I noticed that the foreman in charge of the workmen who were employed upon the building of the terrace walk and the future sunken garden stood at the side of the path to speak to me.

"What is it?" I said to him.

"Excuse me, Mr. Ashley, sir," he said, "I looked for you yesterday just to warn you, if you should go on the terrace walk, not to stand on the bridgeway we are building across the sunken garden."

"Why, what is wrong with it?"

"It's only a framework, sir, until we can get working on it Monday morning. The planking looks firm enough to the eye, but it

doesn't bear no weight upon it. Anyone stepping on it, thinking to cross to the farther side, could fall and break his neck."

"Thank you," I said, "I will remember."

I turned to find my party had come to their agreement, and as on that first Sunday, which now seemed so long ago, we split into three groups, Rachel and my godfather driving in his carriage, and Louise and I in mine. The Pascoes, in their brougham, followed third. I kept thinking of the first time, nearly ten months before, on that Sunday in September. I had been irritated by Louise that morning, sitting so stiff and proud, and had neglected her from that day forward. She had not wavered, but had stayed my friend. When we topped the hill, I said to her, "Did you know that laburnum seeds are poisonous?"

She looked at me, surprised. "Yes, I believe so," she said. "I know that if cattle eat them they die. And children, too. What makes you ask? Have you lost cattle at the Barton?"

"No, not yet," I said, "but Tamlyn spoke to me the other day about moving the trees that lean from the plantation to the field beneath, because of the seeds falling to the ground."

"It might be wise to do so," she replied. "Father lost a horse once, years ago, eating yew berries. It can come about so quickly, and there is nothing one can do." I turned my head; the other carriages were following. "I want to talk to you, Louise," I said to her. "When your father leaves after dinner, make an excuse to stay."

She stared at me, a question in her eyes, but I said no more.

Wellington pulled up before the house. I got out and gave Louise my hand. We stood waiting for the others. Yes, it might have been that other Sunday in September. Rachel was smiling now, as she smiled then. That Sunday she had been a stranger to me still. And now? Now, no part of her was strange. I knew the best, I knew the worst. Even the motives for all she did, baffling, perhaps, even to herself, I guessed them, too. She hid nothing from me now, Rachel my torment. . . .

"This," she said, smiling, as we all assembled in the hall, "is like old times again. I am so happy you have come."

She embraced the party in a glance and led the way to the drawing-room. Outside the sun beat down upon the lawns. A lazy bumble-bee droned against one of the windows. The visitors sat down, languid and content to rest. Seecombe brought cake and wine.

"You are all overcome because of a little sun," laughed Rachel. "To me, it is nothing. In Italy we have it thus for nine months in the year. I thrive upon it. Here, I will wait upon you all. Philip, remain seated. You are still my patient."

She poured the wine into the glasses and brought it to us. When she came last to me, I was the only one who did not drink.

"Not thirsty?" she said.

I shook my head. I would take nothing from her hands again. She put the glass back upon the tray, and with her own went and sat beside Mrs. Pascoe and Louise upon the sofa.

"I would dearly love to visit Florence," said Mary Pascoe, her eyes round, and Rachel turned to her and said, "Then you must do so next year and come and stay with me. You must all come and stay with me, in turn." At once we were in the midst of exclamations, questions, and expressions of dismay. Must she go soon? When would she return? She shook her head in answer. "Presently I shall go," she said, "and presently return. I act on impulse and will not confine myself to dates." Nor would she be drawn into further detail.

I saw my godfather glance at me out of the corner of his eye; then stare at his feet. I could imagine the thought that was passing through his head. "Once she has gone, he will be himself again." The afternoon wore on. At four we sat to dinner. Once more I was seated at the head of the table and Rachel at the foot, my godfather and the vicar on either hand. Once more there were talk and laughter, even poetry. I sat, much with the same silence that I had at first, and watched her face. Then, it had been with fascination, because unknown. The continuation of conversation, the change of topic, the inclusion of each person at the table, was something that I had never seen a woman do; so it was magic. Now I knew all the tricks.

My godfather finished a story he had been telling her. There

was a pause, and silence. Trained now to all her movements, I watched her eyes. They looked to Mrs. Pascoe, then to me. "Shall we go into the garden?" she said. We all rose from our chairs, and the vicar, pulling out his watch, sighed and observed, "Much as I regret it, I must tear myself away."

"I, too," remarked my godfather. "I have a brother sick at Lux-ilyan, and promised to call and see him. But Louise may stay."

"Surely you have time to drink your tea?" said Rachel; but it seemed the hour was later than they thought, and at length, after some pother, Nick Kendall and the Pascoes departed in the brougham. Louise alone remained.

"Since there are only the three of us," said Rachel, "let us be informal. Come to the boudoir." And smiling at Louise, she led the way upstairs. "Louise shall drink *tisana*," she called over her shoulder. "I will show her my method. When her father suffers from insomnia, if ever, this is the remedy."

We all came to the boudoir and sat down, I by the open window, Louise upon the stool. Rachel busied herself with her preparations.

"The English way," said Rachel, "if there can be an English way, which I rather doubt, is to take peeled barley. I brought my own dried herbs from Florence. If you like the taste, I will leave some with you when I go. Here, take your cup."

She gave the cup to Louise, who sat down on the stool. Then she brought me mine, where I was sitting on the window sill.

I shook my head. "No *tisana*, Philip?" she said. "But it is good for you and makes you sleep. You have never refused before."

"You drink it for me," I replied.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Mine is already poured. I like it to stand longer. This must be wasted. What a pity." She leaned over me and poured it from the window. Drawing back, she put her hand on my shoulder, and from her came the scent I knew so well. No perfume, but the essence of her own person, the texture of her skin.

"Are you not well?" she whispered, so that Louise could not hear.

If all knowledge and all feeling could be blotted out, I would have asked it then, that she should remain, her hand upon my shoulder. No letter torn to shreds, no secret packet locked in a little drawer, no evil, no duplicity. Her hand moved from my shoulder to my chin and stayed there for a moment in a brief caress. "My sullen one," she said.

I looked above her head and saw the portrait of Ambrose above the mantelpiece. His eyes stared straight into mine, in youth and innocence. I answered nothing; and, moving from me, she put back my empty cup on to the tray.

She chatted a while with Louise; then, putting her cup upon the tray, she said, "Now it is cooler, who will walk with me in the garden?" I glanced at Louise, who, looking at me, stayed silent.

"I have promised Louise," I said, "to show her an old plan of the Pelyn estate that I came across the other day. The boundaries are marked to show the old hill fortress being part of it."

"Very well," said Rachel, "take her to the drawing-room, or remain here, as you please. I shall take my walk alone."

She went, humming a song, into the blue bedroom.

"Stay where you are," I said softly to Louise.

I went downstairs and to the office, for in truth there was an old plan that I had somewhere. I found it in a file and went back across the court. As I came to the side door that led from near the drawing-room to the garden, Rachel was setting forth upon her walk. She wore no hat, but had her sunshade, open, in her hand. "I shall not be long," she said. "I'm going up to the terrace—I want to see if a little statue would look well in the sunken garden."

"Have a care," I said to her.

"Why, of what?" she asked.

She stood beside me, her sunshade resting on her shoulder.

"Have a care," I said slowly, "of walking beneath the sun."

She laughed and went from me. I watched her cross the lawn and climb the steps towards the terrace.

I turned back into the house and, going swiftly up the stairs, came to the boudoir. Louise was waiting there.

"I want your help," I said briefly. "I have little time to lose."

She rose from the stool, her eyes a question. "What is it?"

"You remember the conversation that we had those weeks ago in the church?" I said to her. She nodded.

"Well, you were right, and I was wrong," I answered, "but never mind that now. I have suspicions of worse besides, but I must have final proof. I think she has tried to poison me and that she did the same to Ambrose." Louise said nothing. Her eyes widened in horror.

"It does not matter how I discovered it," I said, "but the clue may lie in a letter from that man Rainaldi. I am going to search her bureau to find it. You learned a smattering of Italian with your French. Between us, we can reach some translation."

Already I was looking through the bureau, more thoroughly than I had been able to do the night before by candlelight.

"Why did you not warn my father?" said Louise. "If she is guilty, he could accuse her with greater force than you."

"I must have proof," I answered her.

Here were papers, envelopes, stacked neatly in a pile. Here were receipts and bills that might have alarmed my godfather had he seen them but meant little to me, in my fever to discover what I sought. I tried again the little drawer that held the packet. This time it was not locked. I pulled it open, and the drawer was empty. The envelope had gone. This might be an added proof, but my *tisana* had been poured away. I went on opening the drawers, and Louise stood beside me, her brows knit with anxiety. "You should have waited," she said. "It is not wise. You should have waited for my father, who could take legal action. What you are doing now is what anyone might do, a common thief."

"Life and death," I said, "do not wait for legal action. Here, what is this?" I tossed her a long paper with names upon it. Some of them in English, some Latin, some Italian.

"I am not sure," she answered, "but I think it is a list of plants and herbs. The writing is not clear."

She puzzled over it as I turned out the drawers. "There is nothing here about poison," said Louise finally.

I continued searching the desk. I found a letter from the bank. I recognized the handwriting of Mr. Couch. Ruthless and careless now, I opened it.

Dear Madam,

We thank you for the return of the Ashley collection of jewels, which, according to your instruction, as you are shortly to leave the country, will remain with us in custody until such time as your heir, Mr. Philip Ashley, may take possession of them.

*Yours faithfully,
Herbert Couch*

I put the letter back in sudden anguish. Whatever Rainaldi's influence, some impulse of her own directed this last action.

There was nothing else of any matter. I had searched thoroughly each drawer, raked every pigeon-hole. Baffled, frustrated, I turned again to Louise. "It is not here," I said.

"Have you looked through the blotter?" she asked in doubt.

Like a fool, I had laid it on the chair, never thinking that so obvious a place could hide a secret letter. I took it up, and there, in the centre, between two clean white sheets, fell out the envelope from Plymouth. The letter was still inside. I pulled it from its cover and gave it to Louise. "This is it," I said; "see if you can decipher it."

She looked down at the piece of paper, then gave it back to me. "But it isn't in Italian," she said to me. "Read it yourself."

I read the note. There were only a few brief lines. He had dispensed with formality, as I had thought he might; but not in the manner I had pictured. There was no beginning.

Since you have become more English than Italian, I write to you in your language of adoption. We weigh anchor at midnight. I will do all you ask of me in Florence, and perhaps more besides, though I am not sure you deserve any of it. At least the villa will be waiting for you, and the servants, when you at last decide to tear yourself away. Do not delay too long. I have never had great faith in those impulses of your heart and your emotions. If, in the end, you cannot bring yourself to leave that boy behind, then bring

him with you. I warn you, though, against my better judgment. Have a care to yourself, and believe me, your friend, Rainaldi.

I read it once, then twice. I gave it to Louise.

"Does it give you the proof you wanted?" she asked.

"No," I said. "There never will be any proof. Not now. Not ever."

"If there is no proof," said Louise, "you cannot condemn her. She may be innocent. She may be guilty. You can do nothing. Let's leave this room and go down into the drawing-room. I wish now we had not meddled with her things."

I stood by the open window of the boudoir, staring out across the lawn.

"Is she there?" asked Louise.

"No," I said, "she has been gone nearly half an hour and has not returned."

Louise crossed the room and stood by my side. She looked into my face. "Why is your voice so strange?" she said. "Why do you keep your eyes fixed there on those steps leading to the terrace walk? Is anything the matter?"

I brushed her aside and went towards the door.

"Do you know the bell rope on the landing beneath the belfry," I said to her, "the one that is used at noon to summon the men to dinner? Go now and pull it hard."

She looked at me, puzzled. "What for?" she asked.

"Because it is Sunday," I said, "and everyone is out, or sleeping, or scattered somewhere; and I may need help."

"Help?" she repeated.

"Yes," I said, "there may have been an accident to Rachel."

Louise stared at me. Her eyes, so grey and candid, searched my face.

"What have you done?" she said; and apprehension came upon her, conviction, too. I turned and left the room.

I ran downstairs and out across the lawn and up the path to the terrace walk. There was no sign of Rachel.

Near the stones and mortar and the stack of timber above the

sunken garden the two dogs were standing. One of them, the younger, came towards me. The other stayed where he was, close to the heap of mortar. I saw her footsteps in the sand and lime, and her sunshade, still open, tipped upon its side. Suddenly the bell rang out from the clock tower on the house. It went on and on, and the day being still and calm, the sound of it must have travelled across the field, down to the sea, so that men fishing in the bay would have heard it, too.

I came to the edge of the wall above the sunken garden and saw where the men had started work upon the bridge. Part of the bridge still remained and hung suspended, grotesque and horrible, like a swinging ladder. The rest had fallen to the depths below.

I climbed down to where she lay among the timber and the stones. I took her hands and held them. They were cold.

"Rachel," I said to her, and "Rachel" once again.

The dogs began barking up above, and louder still came the sound of the clanging bell. She opened her eyes and looked at me. At first, I think, in pain. Then in bewilderment. Then finally, so I thought, in recognition. Yet I was in error, even then. She called me Ambrose. I went on holding her hands until she died.

They used to hang men at Four Turnings in the old days.
Not any more, though.



Daphne du Maurier



DAPHNE DU MAURIER was born into a distinguished literary and theatrical family (her grandfather wrote the still-popular *Trilby* and *Peter Ibbetson*, while her father was the famous actor, Sir Gerald du Maurier). She began to write almost as soon as she could hold a pen, and her first novel, *The Loving Spirit*, appeared in 1931, when she was in her early twenties. In 1938, *Rebecca* made her famous and, with her, the great manor house of Menabilly, in Cornwall, where she lives, and where three of her novels—including *My Cousin Rachel*—are laid. Her other successful books include *Jamaica Inn*, *Frenchman's Creek* and *The King's General*.

Fair and classically handsome, with a taste for tweeds and the outdoor life, Miss du Maurier is married to Lieut.-Gen. Sir Frederick ("Boy") Browning, Treasurer to the Duke of Edinburgh. During his absences on royal business she works methodical hours in a studio in the lovely grounds of Menabilly.

Illustrations by James Alexander

THE SILENT WORLD

A condensation from the book by

CAPTAIN J. Y. COUSTEAU, WITH FRÉDÉRIC DUMAS



"The Silent World" is published by Hamish Hamilton, London

THE silent, mysterious world that lies under the sea is the special province of Captain J. Y. Cousteau. Co-inventor of the aqualung—a self-contained breathing apparatus which is strapped to a man's back—he and his associate, Frédéric Dumas, have explored and recorded the wonders of a fantastic frontier. With the freedom of fish they have glided through the eerie and often treacherous hulls of sunken ships. They have gambolled with the playful porpoise in his own element. They have met dangerous sharks on terms of equality rarely granted to man.

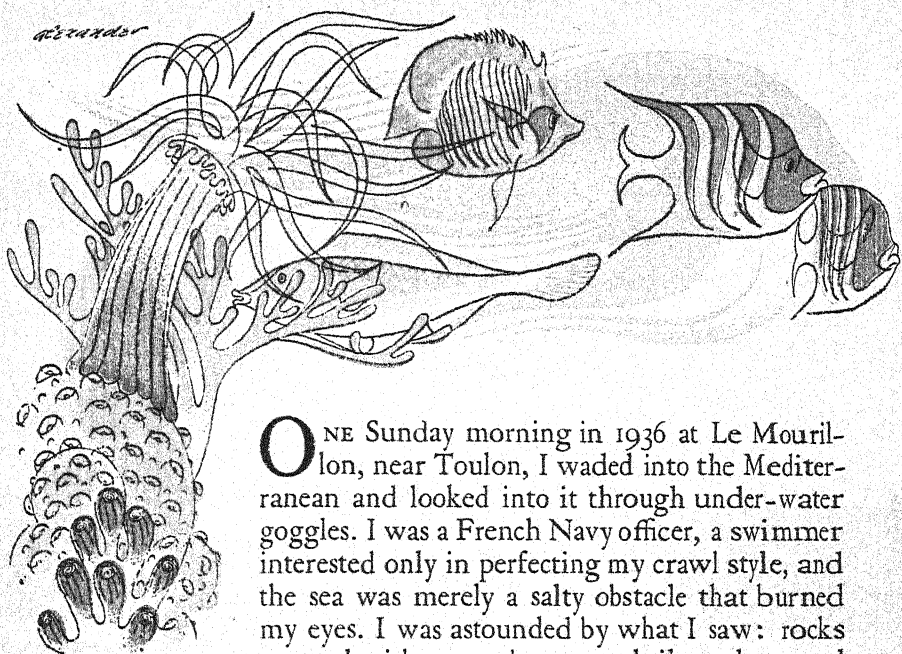
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ONE Sunday morning in 1936 at Le Mourillon, near Toulon, I waded into the Mediterranean and looked into it through under-water goggles. I was a French Navy officer, a swimmer interested only in perfecting my crawl style, and the sea was merely a salty obstacle that burned my eyes. I was astounded by what I saw: rocks covered with green, brown and silver algae, and fishes unknown to me, swimming in crystal-clear water. Standing up to breathe I saw a trolley-bus, people, electric street lights. I put my eyes under again and civilization vanished. I was in a jungle never seen by those who floated on the opaque roof.

My whole life was changed on that summer's day, when my eyes were opened on the sea. Thereafter I listened hungrily to gossip about heroes of the Mediterranean, with their goggles and rubber foot fins. The incredible Le Moigne, who immersed himself in the ocean and killed fish with a slingshot! The fabulous Frédéric Dumas—the best goggle diver in France—who speared them with a curtain rod. These men were crossing the frontier between two hostile worlds, and I resolved to join them.

After I had been goggle diving two years I met Dumas. And as I already knew the man who had instructed *him* in undersea techniques, Lieutenant de Vaisseau Philippe Tailliez, the day was important to each of us. For we three became a team.

We were young, and sometimes rash in our eagerness, and we learned to go sixty feet down without apparatus—the working depth of pearl and sponge divers. But the sea concealed enigmas we could only glimpse in our two-minute dives. We wanted breathing equipment which would allow us to stay longer in this new world. So we began experimenting with diving gear. All the types we tried were unsatisfactory: they were dangerous, or they required a diver to be heavily weighted and walk on the bottom, or they tethered a man to a surface air pump. We wanted freedom to make unencumbered flights in the depths of the sea.

IN the late summer of 1939 I made a speech at a dinner party, explaining why war could not come for at least ten years. Four days later I was aboard my cruiser, speeding west under secret orders; the next day at Oran, in North Africa, we heard the declaration of war.

Alongside our ship lay a division of Royal Navy torpedo boats, one of which was disabled by a heavy steel cable fouled in her screw. There were no navy divers at Oran. I volunteered to make a skin dive—a dive without apparatus of any kind—to survey the situation. Even the sight of the screw did not cool my ardour: the thick wire was wound six times round the shaft and several times round the blades. I called on five good skin divers from my ship, and we dived repeatedly to hack away the cable. After five hours we cleared the propeller, and crawled back on our ship, barely able to stand. The torpedo boat sailed out with its division and, as it passed, the crew turned out at the rail and gave three cheers for the crazy Frenchmen. That day I learned that heavy exertion underwater was madness. It was absolutely necessary to have breathing apparatus to do such jobs.

Later in the war, while I was working for Naval Intelligence in Marseilles against the occupying powers, my commander insisted that I continue my diving experiments to help camouflage the secret work I was doing. My diving companions and I were then dreaming about a self-contained compressed-air lung. I wanted a device that would release air to the diver automatically

on demand, and I went to Paris to find an engineer who would know what I was talking about. I had the luck to meet Émile Gagnan, an expert on industrial-gas equipment who had been working on a demand valve. In a few weeks we finished our first automatic air regulator.

One morning in June 1943, at Bandol on the French Riviera, Dumas, Tailliez and I unpacked the first "aqualung," which Gagnan and I had designed together. We found an assembly of three cylinders of compressed air, linked to an air regulator the size of an alarm clock. From the regulator there extended two tubes, joining on to a mouthpiece. If it worked, diving could be revolutionized.

We hurried to a sheltered cove which would conceal our activity from curious bathers and Italian occupation troops. It was difficult to contain my excitement as we planned my first dive. Dumas—"Didi," as he was known—would stay on shore while my wife, Simone, swam out on the surface with a surface breathing tube and watched me through her submerged mask. If she signalled anything had gone wrong, Dumas could dive to me in seconds.

My friends harnessed the aqualung on my back. I moulded the soft rubber flanges of a watertight glass mask tightly over forehead and cheekbones and fitted the aqualung mouthpiece under my lips. The weight of the fifty-pound apparatus and the wide rubber fins I wore on each foot to increase my under-water mobility gave me a Charlie Chaplin waddle as I staggered into the sea.

A modest canyon opened below, full of dark green weeds, black sea urchins and small flowerlike white algae. The sand sloped down into a clear blue infinity. The sun struck so brightly I had to squint. I kicked my foot fins languidly and travelled down, gaining speed, watching the beach reel past. I stopped kicking and the momentum carried me on a fabulous glide. When I stopped, I slowly emptied my lungs and held my breath: I sank dreamily down. I inhaled a great chestful of air and retained it; I rose towards the surface. There was a faint whistle when I inhaled and a light rippling sound of bubbles when I breathed out. The bubbles kept me company. I took normal breaths in a slow rhythm, bowed

my head and swam smoothly down to thirty feet.

I reached the bottom in a state of excitement. A school of silvery sars, round and flat as saucers, swam among the rocks. I looked up and saw the surface shining like a defective mirror. In the centre of the looking-glass was the trim silhouette of Simone, reduced to a doll. I waved. The doll waved at me.

Delivered from gravity and buoyancy, I swam across the rocks and compared myself favourably with the sars. To halt and hang attached to nothing, with no lines or air pipe to the surface, was a dream. I thought of the helmet diver struggling to walk a few yards, obsessed with his air hoses, his head imprisoned in copper, a cripple in an alien land. From this day forward we would swim, free and level, across miles of country no man had ever known.

I experimented with all possible manœuvres—loops, somersaults, barrel rolls. I stood upside down and laughed shrilly. Nothing altered the automatic rhythm of the air flow.

I went down to sixty feet. Here were tantalizing crevices we had been obliged to pass fleetingly before. I swam inch by inch into a dark narrow cave and found the roof thronged with lobsters, like great flies on a ceiling. I turned over, hung on my back, and breathed lesser lungfuls to keep my chest from touching them. Above water, I remembered, was occupied, ill-fed France. Carefully I plucked a pair of one-pound lobsters from the roof, and carried them towards the surface.

Simone swam down towards me and took the lobsters while I went down again. She came up under a rock on which a torpid Provençal citizen sat fishing. When a blonde girl emerged from the combers with lobsters wriggling in her hands and said, "Could you please watch these for me?" he dropped his rod.

Simone made five more surface dives to take lobsters from me and carry them to the rock. I surfaced in the cove, out of the fisherman's sight. Simone claimed her lobster swarm. She said, "Keep one, *monsieur*. They are easy to catch if you do as I did."

WE had started aqualung diving with no plans for particularly deep descents, but the sea lured us down. After we had gone to

one hundred and thirty feet several times, Dumas decided to see what limit a man could safely reach.

On an October afternoon in 1943 we arrived in a Mediterranean fishing village for a carefully controlled test. A hundred-metre length of rope, knotted at every metre, was methodically examined and measured by official witnesses. Didi, wearing an aqualung and a heavily weighted belt, would descend along the knotted rope to the greatest depth he could reach. There he would remove his weighted belt, tie it on the rope to mark the depth, and then speed to the surface. We guessed that he would not be down long enough to incur an attack of "the bends."

Two launches full of witnesses accompanied the condemned man to sea and anchored in two hundred and forty feet of water. An autumn wind drove a white crowned chop past our gunwales. As safety man, I entered the water first, and was swept away from the launch. I swam hard to get back to it and had to struggle to stay alongside. Didi came into the water. He was overweighted, and under water he discovered that when he turned his head to the left it pinched off his air intake hose. I swam to catch the knotted rope as it was thrown overboard. I clutched the rope. Having adjusted his hose, Dumas went under again. I looked down and saw Didi sinking under his weights and swimming against the sweep of current to gain the knotted rope. When he caught it a flume of air came out of his regulator, a sign of exhaustion. He lowered himself hand under hand into the turbid sea.

Still panting from my fight on the surface, I followed him towards my sentry post a hundred feet down. Didi did not look up. I saw his fists and head melting into the dun water.

Here is how he described the dive:

"I cannot see clearly. Either the sun is going down quickly or my eyes are weak. I reach the hundred-foot knot. I am panting, but I feel wonderful. I have a queer feeling of bliss. I am drunk and carefree. My ears buzz and my mouth tastes bitter. The current staggers me as though I had had too many drinks.

"I have forgotten Cousteau and the people in the boats. I lower myself farther, trying to think about the bottom, but I can't. I am

going to sleep, but I can't fall asleep in such dizziness. There is a little light around me. I reach for the next knot and miss it. I reach again and tie my belt on it. Liberated from weights, I bound upward. The drunken sensation vanishes. I am sober and infuriated not to have descended farther. I hurry on up. I am told I was down seven minutes."

Didi's belt was tied off two hundred and ten feet down. No independent diver had ever been deeper. Yet Dumas's impression was that he had been down slightly under one hundred feet. His drunkenness was nitrogen narcosis, a condition of which we knew nothing at the time. We called the seizure *l'ivresse des grandes profondeurs* (rapture, or "intoxication," of the great depths). The first stage is a mild anæsthesia, after which the diver becomes a god. If a passing fish seems to require air, the crazed diver may tear out his air pipe or mouth grip as a sublime gift. The complex process, still an issue among diving physiologists, may derive from nitrogen over-saturation. It has no relation to the bends. It is a gaseous attack on the central nervous system.

I personally am quite susceptible to "depth rapture." I like the agreeable glow—and fear it like doom. It destroys the instinct of life. Tough individuals are not overcome as soon as nervous ones, but they have even more difficulty recovering their control.

L'ivresse des grandes profondeurs has one marked advantage over alcohol—no hangover. If one is able to escape from its zone, the brain clears instantly and there are no horrors in the morning. I cannot read accounts of a record dive without wanting to ask the champion how "drunk" he was.

SINCE that night in November 1942, when Hitler had broken his pledge and invaded the naval base at Toulon, and the French fleet had scuttled itself, sunken ships had preyed on our minds. As we planned our future diving programme Dumas talked about nothing but wrecks. We decided to make a film of sunken ships.

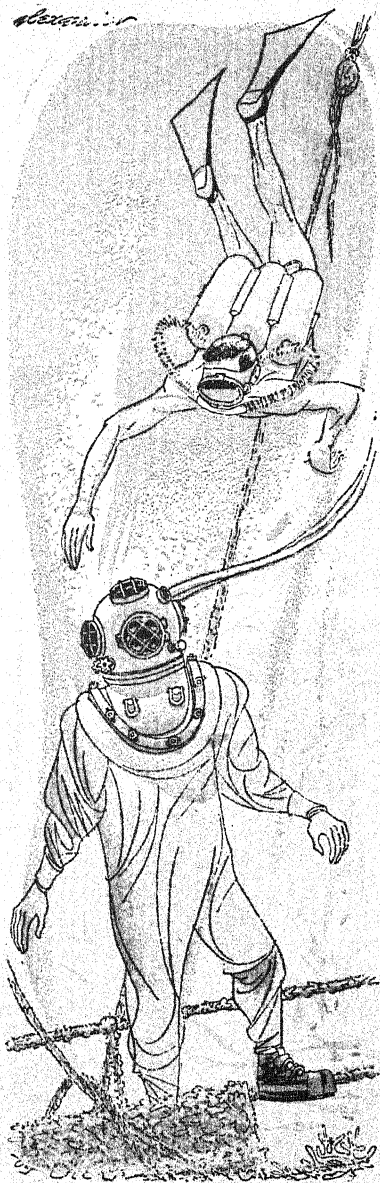
To do so, we had to have the acquiescence of the occupying Germans. I had an *ordre de mission* from the International Committee for Exploration of the Mediterranean, of which an Italian

admiral was ex-chairman. This link with *Kultur* had a magic effect on even the most brutal-looking Hitlerite. The German authorities permitted us to work without hindrance.

The first wreck we visited was an ocean-going tug, part of the scuttled French fleet. It lay in forty-five feet of clear water at Toulon. A Genoese salvage diver named Gianino was surveying it for the Italian Navy. We accompanied him to film him at work.

The sea profoundly changes a sunken ship. Rust advances under the paint. Weeds and animals come and live on it. From afar it seems to be a rock. Then comes a tremor of recognition: it is a ship that has lost its pride. In eight months luxuriant weeds had thickened the tug's rigging and upholstered the hulk like a floral carnival float. Black mussels grew on the ventilators and rails like funeral ornaments. There were many fish about, mainly sea bass, which did not seem to regard us as anything unusual.

Gianino was elated at the opportunity to show his skill. But the helmet diver, with his heavy leaden shoes, cannot walk without raising whirlwinds of sand and algae from the bottom. To



make good clear pictures, we had to have an undisturbed sea floor; Gianino's scuffling walk was disastrous. Nevertheless, inspired by the camera, he enacted fantasies. He leaned down dramatically and clutched a red starfish to his breast. We "filmed" long sequences of his under-water performance. In order not to disappoint him, we didn't tell him that we had left the camera at Toulon and had taken down only the case.

Gianino lifted the tug's engine-room hatch, tied it back with a rotten cord, valved half the air in his suit and dropped into the hold. Then he reinflated his dress and soared out like a barrage balloon. He was master of the vertical, but was almost unable to manœuvre horizontally.

In contrast, I watched Didi, wearing the aqualung, swim lazily along the deck to the forepeak. When he came upon the standing forecandle hatch, he opened the door cautiously, hesitated a moment, then plunged in, like a man diving into an ink bottle. In a moment his flippers reappeared and he backed out.

To one who glided easily across the moss-covered deck, nothing was wood, bronze or iron. The ship's fittings lost their meaning. Here was a strange tubular hedge, as though trimmed by a fancy gardener. Didi reached into the hedge and turned a wheel and the cylinder rose smoothly. It was a gun barrel. Steel mechanisms last a long time in the sea. We have seen Diesel motors and electric generators brought up in excellent condition after three years.

THE SHIP that became our academy of the art of exploring wrecks was the four-thousand-ton freighter *Tozeur*, which went down against Frioul rock, near Marseilles, before the war. The prow emerged from the surf and the stern lay sixty-five feet down, making a path from air to water. Covered with a thick blanket of marine organisms, she was an idealization of a wreck, one of the few that really looked like the sunken ship of a schoolboy's dream.

The *Tozeur* was treacherous, however. Many of her surfaces were adorned with nasty little "dog's teeth," razor-edged incisor clams which may be venomous as well as sharp. When a swell brushed our near-naked bodies against the ship, we were dealt

some scattered cuts. We also had sudden nose-to-nose encounters with camouflaged scorpion fish, ugly as toads.

We filmed long sequences of the handsome ruin for our movie, *Épaves* (Sunken Ships). We explored the ship thoroughly. Didi penetrated the engine-room hatch and Philippe Tailliez and I followed him down. The bulkhead openings were arched in the fashion of cloisters, and there were other ecclesiastical effects—weeds that grew like lichens in a damp chapel, and light filtering down as though from clerestory windows.

We followed Didi through the iron abbey to the intricate stairway, and carefully swam down two flights of ladders. Suddenly the ship reverberated with a tremendous bang. We stiffened and looked at each other. Nothing happened. Didi plunged down another flight. There came a second bang, a series of them. Then we realized it was the swell. The shallow wreck was working in the swell, popping a rivet or creaking a plate.

In the aftcastle we found a big brilliant bubble, a bottle of some fluid that had not been invaded by the sea. Didi brought it up and gave it to Simone. She poured some of the liquid on her palm and sniffed it. "It's good prewar Eau de Cologne," she said.

One of our film locations was Planier Island, in the main roadstead of Marseilles, the site of a famous lighthouse which the Germans had wantonly destroyed. Under Planier, on a treacherous rocky plateau, lay the five-thousand-ton British steamer, *Dalton*. One day, working on the *Dalton*, Didi had an experience that almost ended in tragedy.

He wanted to finish a film sequence in the aftcastle, so he walked down the stone stairs of the lighthouse and dived into the thrashing surf with a camera. He went down alone, tossed in the heavy combers. Six feet under, the water was calm and sleepy, but he could feel the crests running overhead by increased pressure on his ear-drums.

Didi entered the engine-room hatch on his course to the aftcastle. In the engine-room he felt something holding him back by the left air hose, the inhalation pipe. The mask blocks visibility at the sides, so Dumas could not see the obstacle. He tried to turn

his head but the obstruction prevented it. Whatever it was, his hose was straining against it. Didi reached his hand behind his head and felt a pipe covered with razor-sharp dog's-teeth clams.

Then he saw that the pipe passed over his left shoulder, between his air hose and his neck. Somehow he had looped his hose over a broken end of it and had passed on down. He was held like a quoit on a stake. Miraculously the clams had not cut the hose or his neck tendons.

He had no way of knowing how far he had passed down the pipe. He dropped the camera and hung, without moving a muscle, and thanked Providence that there was no current running in the *Dalton*. He was a hundred feet down, cut off from his comrades by a wild surf.

Dumas reached back and placed both hands around the pipe to keep it from touching his neck and hose. He drew himself backward, inch by inch, taking new hand grips on the clams, prepared to cut his palms to ribbons to get off the pipe. For an infinite time he worked his way back, a handbreadth at a time.

His hand felt the torn end of the pipe and he was free. He had moved only ten feet along the pipe, but it had been the longest undersea journey of his life. Without bothering about his lacerated hands, he picked up the camera and filmed a last view of the *Dalton* in the supernatural light below the storm. Then he returned to the lighthouse stairs and climbed to the surface.

After Dumas's ordeal on the pipe, we made a rule never to go down alone. It was the beginning of team diving, the essence of aqualung work.

We have dived more than five hundred times in about twenty-five sunken ships.

People invariably ask: "In all those wrecks what treasures have you found?" The answer is none.

Legends of undersea treasure are ninety-nine per cent swindles. The get-rich-quick instinct is never more successfully exploited than by promoters with faded maps of sunken galleons. A serious salvor will keep his activities as clandestine as possible. The very fact that public subscriptions are invited for a treasure expedition



is almost a guarantee that the attempt is not so much for underwater gold as for surface money.

We were cured of gold fever early in the game, although Dumas has recurring bouts, like malaria. There are modern treasures in sunken ships—tons of tin, copper and wolfram—but they require big salvage operations, controlled by owners, governments or insurance companies, and carried out by long, dull efforts calculated on a narrow profit margin.

The only successful get-rich-quick salvage operation we have encountered was at Do Sal Island in the Cape Verdes. Here we found an old acquaintance, an amateur goggle diver from the Riviera, who insisted that he had a salvage contract for a vessel in twenty-five feet of water, and that he was working it alone, using only mask and fins. I suspected that we were dealing with a case of hallucination.

I asked him what the treasure was.

"Cocoa beans," said our friend. "Four thousand tons of cocoa beans."

We had to leave too soon to investigate this affair, but in Dakar a representative of a marine insurance company bore the man out. "He is on contract to us. He has no salvage equipment whatsoever. Except for butterfly nets."

"Butterfly nets!" said Didi.

"Exactly," said the insurance man. "The jute bags of cocoa beans are floating against the top of the hold. He has a native in a small boat anchored over the wreck. The diver goes down holding his breath, swims in under the hatch, cuts open the bags and sweeps the beans towards the hatch. They float to the surface and the native scoops them up with a butterfly net."

One day a year later Didi and I encountered the salvor himself on the Côte d'Azur.

"My friends," he said, "it was the finest year I have ever spent. My salvage award was eight million, seven hundred and fifty thousand francs" (nearly £10,000).

This proves that there really is treasure under the sea.

WHEN the German occupation ended, in 1945, there were hundreds of jobs for divers in the scuttled French fleet and in ships torpedoed at sea. I went to the Ministry of Marine in Paris and showed the film I had made of Dumas and Tailliez finning through wrecks.

The next day I was on my way to Toulon with a commission to resume our diving experiments.

We acquired a desk in the harbour master's office with a sign, Undersea Research Group. Philippe Tailliez, who was senior to me in the navy, became commandant, and we enlisted Dumas as a civilian specialist. Dumas put the three petty officers who joined us through a rapid course and made them diving instructors. We raised funds, men, motor-cycles and trucks, and acquired a real ocean-going diving tender, the *Élie Monnier*.

One of the assignments given to the Undersea Research Group by the navy was to film a submarine doing some of her tricks

under the sea. For this task we secured the services of the *Rubis*, a mine-laying submarine.

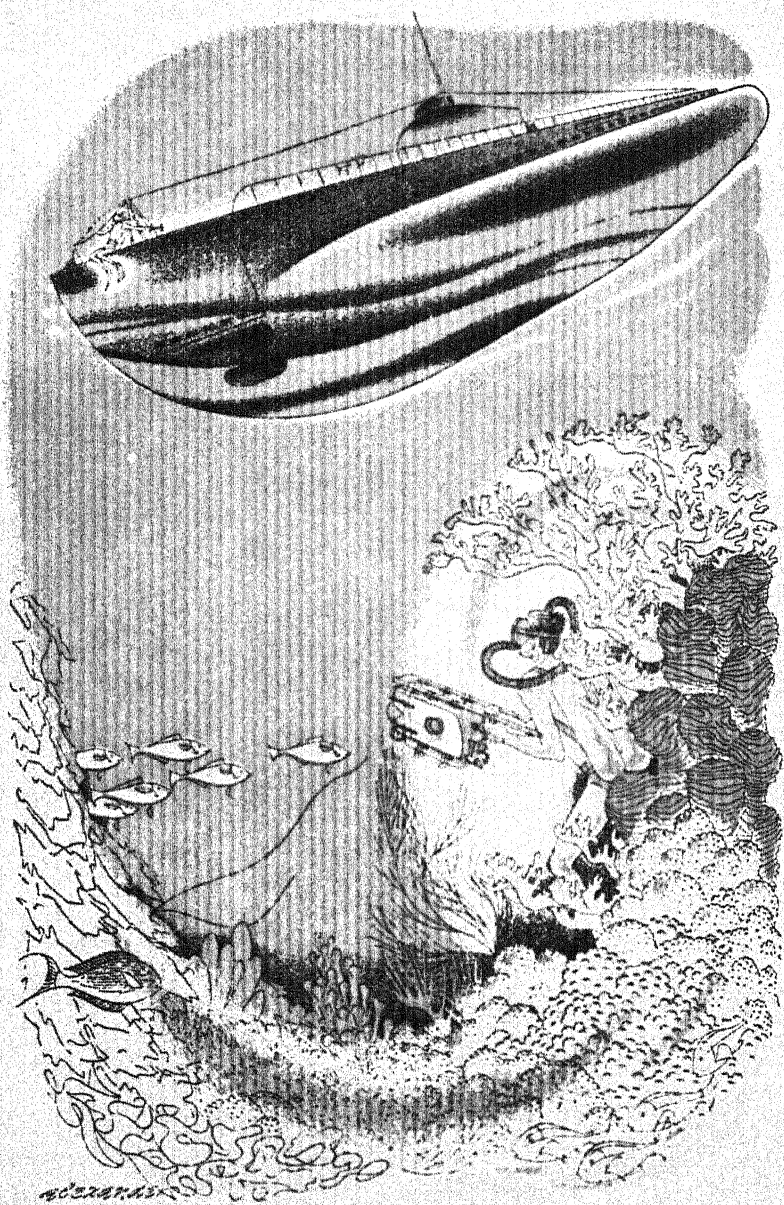
The day we went down to play with the *Rubis* the water was fairly clear. The *Rubis* bottomed, and we lolled beside the motionless submarine, one hundred and twenty feet down, looking at a periscope blinded to the world outside, a compass dead in its gim-bals, a useless machine gun and radar scope, all manned by curious fish. The petrified flag stood unfurled but unwaving, its red and blue panels both the same shade of green, due to colour metamorphosis at that depth.

But forty men were cheerfully alive inside the armoured air bubble—we heard loud domestic clatter, footfalls, the roaring of a pump, a wrench hitting the deck. Then the heavy form stirred and the screws turned, flattening weeds and blowing up algae and mud. The *Rubis* climbed. The bow cleaved the surface first, then the conning tower, and the hull was outlined by a dazzling wreath of foam.

We were wildly impressed : it was incomparably more wonderful than fake submarine shots in war movies.

The *Rubis* bottomed again for a sequence showing the firing of a torpedo fifty feet down. Dumas got up on the hull with a hammer in his hand, while I paced off my camera angle. Thirty feet out I sighted into the torpedo tube and moved six feet to one side of the probable trajectory. I waved to Didi and he smote the hull with his hammer. The tube hatch flew open and the torpedo bounded out towards me. To keep it framed in my lens as it hurtled past, I brought to bear every bit of muscular power I could on the camera and forced it round in the water. The torpedo roared past like a racing car, and I held on it as it dissolved, smearing a white wake through the blue.

For another sequence the *Rubis* was going to cruise at periscope depth, laying a series of four contact mines on the floor fifty feet down. The mines were the old-fashioned spiked-ball type, carried in heavy metal cases. A salt tablet in the case would dissolve in twenty to thirty minutes, releasing the mine, which would ascend on its cable to a point just below the surface.



The problem was how to drop the mine cases into my camera range, so that I could film the entire action of a naval mine.

Dumas said, "I have a plan. I'll ride the sub down and give the order to drop them at the right place." Lt. Jean Ricoul, commander of the submarine, raised his eyebrows. Didi added, "You do not understand. I am going down on the *outside* of the submarine."

Ricoul watched Didi straddle the prow with a hammer in one hand and his other clutching the *Rubis's* net cutter. He watched through the periscope, as the sub went down, and furious bow waves assaulted the rider. As Dumas went under, Ricoul saw, wonderingly, that he was still hanging on against the five-knot avalanche of water.

I felt lost on the bottom, waiting apprehensively in the cold. I had no compass and there is no sense of direction under the sea. Long before the *Rubis* came into view the muffled growls of her engine came at me from all directions.

Then my anxiety vanished as her bow pushed into sight and I saw Dumas—a queer little figurine worn like a lucky charm on the sub's gigantic snout. He hammered on the hull as a signal to the mine layers inside.

How that whale passed! The flanks reeled by, Didi was borne away, and the first mine case fell ten feet from me, silently throwing up a curtain of mud. At twenty-second intervals the other three mine cases fell out, and the mud clouds finally thinned out to reveal the large metal boxes, inside which were the horned mines sucking on their salt tablets. I filmed them from several angles and went back to the surface.

Tailliez went down with the camera to pick out a mine and film its rise to the surface.

In five minutes he heard a distant mechanical rattle. He fingered the camera button. His subject did not stir. One after the other, he heard the other mines go up. Tailliez peered at his choice as long as he could stand the cold. He surfaced after thirty-five minutes to pass on the camera. The remaining mine was released before a relief diver could get down to it.

Ricoul dropped four more mines, and again we picked the wrong one to watch. But this time we organized a rotation of divers to relieve the camera on the spot. We were firm with the reluctant mine. At last the mechanism grumbled and the spiked ball went aloft.

It had taken one hour. The whole mine sequence lasted ninety seconds on the screen.

OUR worst experience in five thousand dives befell us in an inland water cave, the famous Fountain of Vaucluse near Avignon. The spring is a quiet pool in a crater under a six-hundred-foot limestone cliff above the River Sorgue. A constant trickle flows from it until March, when the Fountain erupts in a rage of water which swells the Sorgue to flood. It pumps furiously for five weeks, then subsides. This has occurred every year in recorded history.

No one knew why it discharged this amazing flood. One principle of intermittent natural fountains is that of an underground siphon which taps a pool of water lying higher inside the hill than the water level of the surface pool. Simple overflows of the inner pool by heavy rain seeping through the porous limestone did not explain Vaucluse, because it did not respond entirely to rainfall. There was either a huge reservoir or a series of inner caverns and a system of siphons.

In 1946 the navy gave us permission to dive into the Fountain and try to learn its secret.

We journeyed to Vaucluse on the 24th of August, when the spring was quiescent. Simone came along, not liking this venture at all.

Dumas and I would go down into the pool, tied together by a thirty-foot cord, and heavily weighted so that we could penetrate the tunnel that fed the Fountain. As protection against the cold water I wore a special diving dress over long woollens and Dumas an Italian Navy frogman outfit. Each had a three-cylinder lung, rubber foot fins, heavy dagger and two large waterproof flashlights. Over my left arm was coiled three hundred feet of line.

Dumas carried an emergency micro-aqualung on his belt and a depth guage.

A guide rope, weighted with pig-iron, was lowered beneath the surface of the Fountain and into the tunnel, as far as it would go—to a depth of ninety feet. The rope would be our only communication with our surface commander, Maurice Fargues. Three tugs on the rope meant pay out more line. Six tugs was the emergency signal for Fargues to haul us up as quickly as possible.

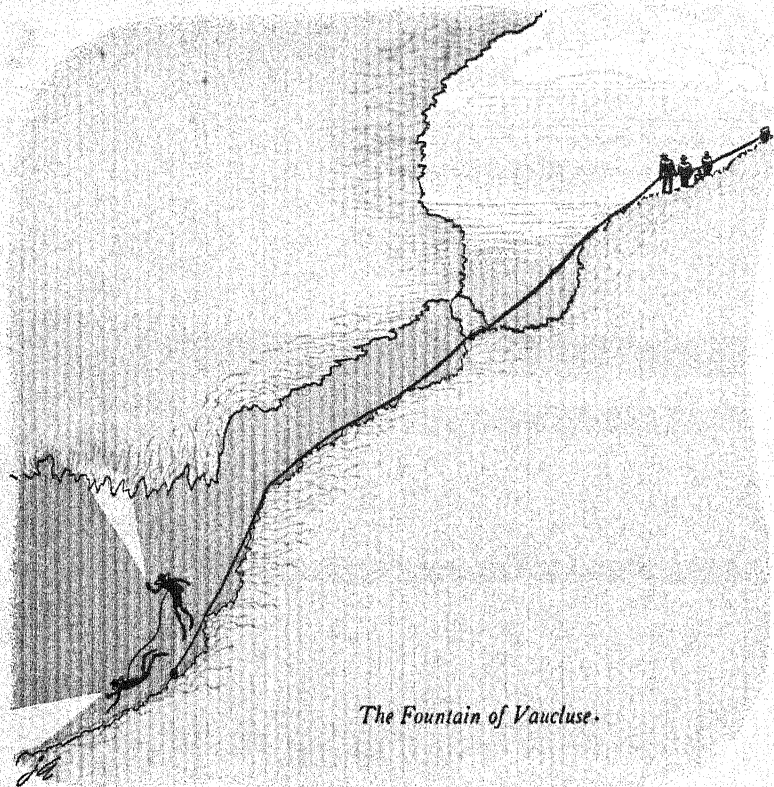
We believed that our goal would be found at the end of a long sloping arm thrusting upward from an elbow in the tunnel, in an air cave where, in some manner unknown, the annual outburst of Vaucluse was launched. When we reached the arm of the siphon, we planned to station the pig-iron, and attach to it one of the lengths of rope I carried over my arm. As we climbed on into the siphon, I would unreel this line behind me.

We required the support of our comrades, as we waded into the pool and looked round for the last time. As we submerged, the water liberated us from weight. We stayed motionless in the pool for a minute to test our ballast and communications system. Under my flexible helmet I had a special mouthpiece which allowed me to articulate under water. Dumas had no speaking facility, but could answer me with gestures.

I turned face down and plunged through the dark door of the tunnel that rolled away down at an angle of forty-five degrees. Dumas was keeping pace on the thirty-foot cord at my waist.

I glanced back and saw Didi gliding easily through the door against a faint green haze. I could not see my flashlight beam beneath me in the frightening dark—the crystal-clear water had no suspended motes to reflect light—though when my flashlight beam hit rock a disc of light blinked on and off in the darkness. I went head down with tigerish speed, sinking by my overballast, unmindful of Dumas.

Suddenly I was held by the belt, and stones rattled past me. Heavier borne than I, Dumas was trying to brake his fall with his feet against the sides of the tunnel and had dislodged stones above me. His frogman's suit was being lacerated on the sharp rocks



The Fountain of Vaucluse.

and filling with water. I remotely realized I should try to think. But I could not.

Ninety feet down I found the pig-iron standing on a ledge, and with a blurred effort I shoved it down the slope. It roared down with Dumas's stones. I did not notice that I had lost the lines coiled on my arm. The tunnel broke into a sharper decline. I circled my right hand continuously, playing the torch in spirals on the clean and polished walls. I was travelling at two knots. I was in the Paris subway. I met nobody. There was nobody in the subway, not a single rock bass. No fish at all.

Why did my ears ache so? Something was happening. My light no longer ran round the tunnel walls. The beam spread on a flat bottom, covered with pebbles. I could find no walls. I was on the floor of a vast drowned cave. I found the pig-iron, but no siphon. My head ached. I was drained of initiative. I returned to our purpose, to learn the geography of the immense cave that had no visible roof or walls, but rolled away down at a forty-five-degree incline. I was determined not to surface without searching the ceiling for the hole that led up to the inner cavern of our theory.

I was attached to something, I remembered. The flashlight picked out a rope which curled off to a strange form floating supine above the pebbles. Dumas hung there in his cumbersome equipment, holding his torch like a ridiculous glow-worm. His ripped frogman suit was filling with water. He struggled weakly to inflate it with compressed air.

I swam to him and looked at his depth gauge. We were two hundred feet down—four hundred feet away from the surface at the bottom of a crooked slanting tunnel.

We had rapture of the depths, but not the familiar exuberant drunkenness. We felt heavy and anxious. I thought: "*I can't go back until I learn where we are. The pig-iron line is our only way home. What if we lose it?*" I closed Dumas's hand round the line. "Stay here," I shouted. "I'll find the siphon."

Dumas, passing under heavy narcosis, understood me to mean I needed the emergency lung. As he fumbled hopelessly at his belt, to release it, he scudded across the pebbly bottom and abandoned the guide line to the surface. The rope dissolved in the dark. I was swimming above, mulishly seeking for a wall or ceiling, when I felt his weight tug me back like a drifting anchor.

Above us were seventy fathoms of tunnel and crumbling rock. My weakened brain found the power to conjure up our fate. When our air ran out we would grope along the ceiling of the cave and suffocate in dulled agony. I shook off this thought and swam down to the ebbing glow of Dumas's flashlight. He had almost lost consciousness. When I touched him, he grabbed my wrist with awful strength and hauled me towards him for a final experience of life,

an embrace that would take me with him. I twisted out of his hold and backed off.

I examined Dumas with the torch and saw his protruding eyes rolling inside the mask.

The cave was quiet between my gasping breaths. I marshalled all my remaining brain power to consider the situation. Fortunately, there was no current to carry Dumas away from the pig-iron. If there had been the least current we would have been lost. *The pig-iron must be near.* I looked for that rusted metal block, more precious than gold. And suddenly there it was, stolid and reassuring. Its line stretched away into the dark towards the surface, towards the hope of life.

I was in a state of exhaustion; I could not swim to the surface dragging the inert Dumas in his waterlogged suit. I grasped the pig-iron rope and started climbing up hand over hand, with Dumas drifting below, along the smooth vertical rock.

My first three handholds on the line were interpreted by Fargues as a signal to pay out more rope. He did so, with a will. I regarded the slackening rope with utter dismay. It took an eternal minute for me to realize that I should continue to haul down rope until the end of it came into Fargues's hand. I hauled rope in dull glee. Four hundred feet of it passed through my hands and curled into the cavern. And a knot came into my hands. Fargues had efficiently tied on another length to encourage us to pass deeper.

I dropped the rope like an enemy. I would have to climb the tunnel slope like an alpinist. Foot by foot I climbed the fingerholds of rock, stopping when I was near to fainting. I reached for a good handhold, standing on the tips of my fins. The crag I sought eluded my fingers and I was dragged down by the weight of Dumas.

I was at the end of my strength.

Why doesn't Dumas understand how bad he is for me? Dumas, you will die anyway. Maybe you are already gone. Go away, Didi. I reached for my belt dagger and prepared to cut the cord to Dumas.

But there was something that held the knife in its sheath. *Before I cut you off, Didi, I will try again to reach Fargues.* I took the line and repeated the distress signal, again and again. *Didi, I am doing all a man can do. I am dying, too.*

On shore, Fargues stood in perplexed concentration, uneasy about the lifelessness of the rope in the last few minutes. He fingered the rope like a pulse, and waited. Then up from the lag of rope, four hundred feet across the friction of rocks, a faint vibration tickled his finger. With a set face he hauled the pig-iron in.

I felt the rope tighten. I jerked my hand off the dagger and hung on. Dumas's air cylinders rang on the rocks as we were borne swiftly up. A hundred feet above I saw a faint triangle of green light, where hope lay.

In less than a minute Fargues pulled us into the pool and leaped in the water after the senseless Dumas. Tailliez waded in after me. I gathered what strength I had left to control my emotions. Dumas lay on his stomach and vomited. Our friends stripped off our rubber suits. I warmed myself round a cauldron of flaming petrol. Fargues and the doctor worked over Dumas. In five minutes he was on his feet, standing by the fire.

I wondered where Simone was. Someone said, "Your wife ran down the hill. She said she could not stand it." Poor Simone had raced to a café in Vaucluse and ordered the most powerful spirit in the house. A rumour-monger raced through the village, yelling that one of the divers was drowned. Simone cried, "Which one? What colour was his mask?"

"Red," said the harbinger. Simone gasped with relief—my mask was blue. Then she thought of Didi in his red mask and her joy collapsed. She returned distractedly up the trail to the Fountain. There stood Didi, a miracle to her.

We drove back to Toulon that night, thinking hard, despite fatigue and headache. We knew the berserk intoxication of the depths in the sea, but why did this clear, lifeless limestone water cheat a man's mind in a different way? Didi said, "Narcotic effects aren't the only cause of diving accidents. There are social and subjective fears, the air you breathe . . ."

I jumped at the idea. "The air you breathe!" I said. "Let's run a lab test on the air left in the aqualungs."

Next morning we sampled the cylinders. The analysis showed 1/2000 part of carbon monoxide. At a depth of one hundred and sixty feet the effect of carbon monoxide is sixfold: the amount we were breathing might kill a man in twenty minutes. We started our new Diesel-powered air compressor. We saw the compressor sucking in its own exhaust fumes.

We had been breathing lethal doses of carbon monoxide.

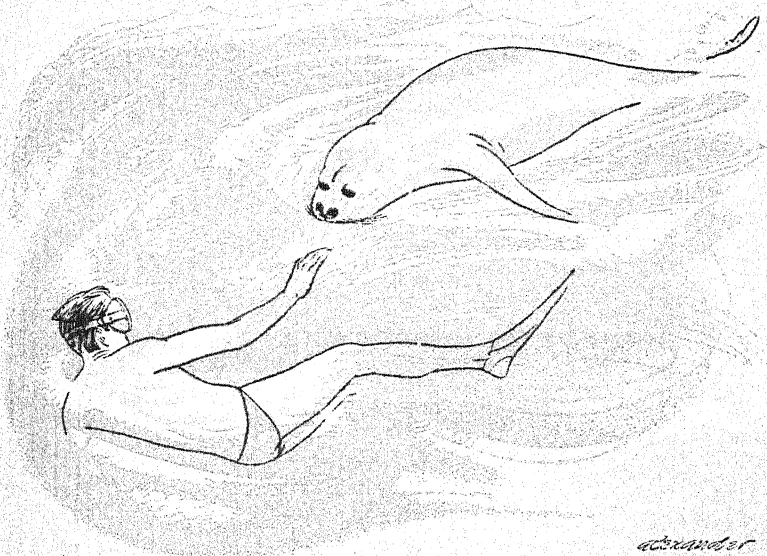
POSSESSION of the ocean-going diving tender *Élie Monnier* turned our Undersea Research Group to oceanography. On her we voyaged to Corsica, Sardinia, Tunisia, Morocco and the open Atlantic, accompanied by scientists who were attracted to the aqualung as an instrument of direct observation which would widen our knowledge of marine life.

Perhaps our most beguiling companion of the sea has been the seal. Once the Mediterranean abounded in monk seals, but the introduction of commercial sealing in the seventeenth century almost exterminated them. However, at Port Étienne, a French outpost near the Spanish Gold Coast, we came across a small colony of this virtually extinct species.

We met a lonely man there, M. Caussé, who declared that the monk seals were his only friends. "On Sundays," he told us, "I crawl quietly on the sand into their midst, and we spend the day on the beach."

After he had introduced us to the herd of twenty seals bathing in the surf, we put on bathing trunks to emulate our host's sociable belly crawls. Philippe and Didi, in mask and fins, swam in from the sea. They were careful about over-familiar contact with these mammals twice their size, which could bite through flesh and bone with their powerful jaws.

Floating in the water, Dumas closely studied the seals' diving technique. They closed their nostrils, turned on their sides, caressed the water with their cheeks, and vanished without a splash. Dumas looked awkward as he tried to copy them.



The seals seemed to enjoy the visit of the amateurs. A big bull quietly submerged behind Tailliez and popped up to surprise him, face to face. Philippe cupped his hand and splashed the seal in the face. The seal puffed and blew like a small boy. Dumas shook with laughter. The laugh turned to a shout. He rolled over and thrust his mask into the water. He saw the departing rump of a seal which had sneaked up and tickled his back with its whiskers.

The Strait of Gibraltar is a unique place to study sea mammals. Thousands of migratory whales and porpoises pass to and fro across the narrow sill between the Mediterranean and Atlantic.

One watches the porpoises race the bow of a ship, vaulting out of the foam. A mother swims with her child, they jostle each other playfully. As the bow speeds, they lie on their flanks and spy the humans with quick little eyes. Presto, for no apparent reason, the ranks thin out—the last porpoise sounds and a curtain of foam is drawn over the ballet of the sea.

We occasionally dived with them and saw them playing chasing games.

They are constructed disturbingly like men—the same size and weight, warm-blooded, with smiling lips and shining eyes. Porpoises are gregarious and social. There are probably more of them in the sea than there are men on earth.

Swimming under water among them we heard their mouselike squeaks, a comical cry for such splendid animals. The porpoise's shrill pip may have a further use than mere conversation in the herd.

One day, forty miles out in the Atlantic on a course for Gibraltar, the *Élie Monnier* was running at twelve knots when a crowd of porpoises overtook us. They were headed on the exact bearing for the centre of the Strait, although land was far out of sight. I ran with them for a while, then altered course five or six degrees, trying to deviate them. The pack accepted the detour for a few minutes, then abandoned the ship and resumed its original heading, running true for the Strait.

Are porpoises equipped with sonic apparatus by which their squeaks are bounced from the bottom to give them the feel of the unseen topography of the ocean floor? Or perhaps deep in their racial instinct there is a knowledge of the course which winds through the far undersea hills and plains to the door of their Mediterranean playground.

FISHING is one of man's oldest occupations and fish stories entered folklore very early. Poets and fakers added their touches to marine superstitions that persist to this day.

If I may put aside the sea snake, the villains of under-sea myth are sharks, octopuses, congers, morays, sting rays, mantas, squids and barracudas. We have met them all but the squid, which lives beneath our depth range. Save for the shark, about which we are still puzzled, they seem a thoroughly harmless lot. Some are indifferent to men; others are curious about us. Most of them are frightened when we approach closely.

Our experiences, of course, have been mainly in the Mediterra-

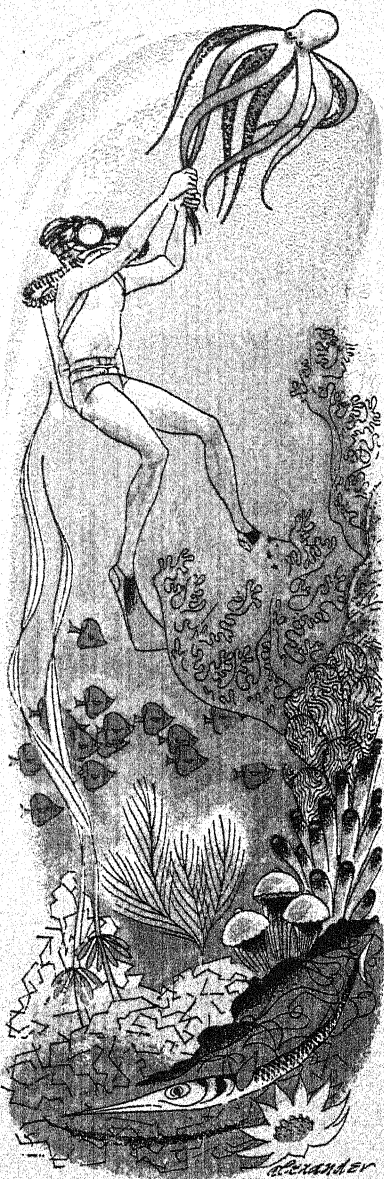
nean with shorter periods in the Atlantic and Red Sea. Perhaps the monsters of the Mediterranean have been tamed and the wild ones live elsewhere.

Consider the case of the octopus.

At first we had natural revulsion against touching the slimy surfaces of rocks and animals, but found that under water the finger tips conveyed no such sense. That made it easier to touch a live octopus for the first time. We saw many of them on the ocean floor and clinging to reefs.

One day Dumas pulled a small one from an under-sea cliff. If Dumas was somewhat apprehensive, the octopus was downright terrorized. It writhed desperately to escape the four-armed monster, and succeeded in breaking loose. It made off by slow jet propulsion, exuding spurts of its ink.

Soon we were handling octopuses of any size we found. They used every trick to escape. The bashful animal usually refused to fasten its suction cups to flesh. Didi tried to wrap



the tentacles round his bare arm, but the octopus would not retain the grip.

Octopuses have remarkable powers of adaptability. This Dumas determined by patiently playing with them until he met some response. He would release a tired octopus and let it jet away. It would discharge several ink bombs and then resort to its last defence, a sudden plunge to immobility on the bottom, where it instantly assumed the local colour and pattern. Then Didi confronted the creature again: exhausted, the octopus sprang hopelessly from the bottom, fanned its legs and dribbled back to the floor.

At this point Dumas found it willing to dance. Taking his pupil by the feet, he led it through some ballet improvisations. Several octopuses, induced to this state of nervous collapse, responded to his figures, and ended the lesson in the attitude of a playful cat. When Didi's air was gone, the spent octopus remained extended and relaxed, watching him fly into the sky. I know this sounds like a story from Marseilles, as we say in France, but I was careful to make movies of it as evidence.

THE SHARK has changed but little in three hundred million years. Across the gulf of ages, the relentless, indestructible killer has come without need of evolution, armed from the very beginning for the fray of existence. After more than a hundred encounters with many varieties of sharks, I can offer two conclusions: (1) the better acquainted we become with sharks, the less we know them, and (2) one can never tell what a shark is going to do.

One day in the Cape Verdes we were finishing a film sequence on trigger fish, when Dumas and I were galvanized with terror. What we saw made us feel that naked men really do not belong under the sea.

At a distance of forty feet there appeared from the grey haze the lead-white bulk of a twenty-five-foot *Carcharodon carcharias*, the only shark that all specialists agree is a confirmed man-eater. Dumas closed in beside me. The brute was swimming lazily. In

that moment I thought that at least he would have a bellyache from our three-cylinder lungs.

Then the shark saw us. His reaction was the last conceivable one. In pure fright, he voided a cloud of excrement and departed at incredible speed.

Dumas and I looked at each other and burst into nervous laughter.

The self-confidence we gained that day led us to a foolish neglect of safety measures. Further meetings with sharp-nosed sharks, tiger sharks, mackerel sharks and ground sharks inflated our sense of shark mastery. They all ran from us. After several weeks in the Cape Verdes, we were ready to state flatly that all sharks were cowards.

One day we harpooned a small bottle-nosed whale. It was lying on the surface, heavily wounded and bleeding. Dumas and I entered the water with a camera. He was to pass a noose over the whale's tail while I filmed.

The water was an exceptionally clear turquoise blue. We were following the harpoon line towards the whale when, in a depth of fifteen feet, we sighted an eight-foot shark of a species we had never before seen. He was impressively neat, light grey, sleek, a real collector's item. We swam boldly towards him, confident that he would run as all the others had. He did not retreat. We drew within ten feet of him and saw all round the shark an escort of tiny striped pilot fish three or four inches long.

They were not following him; they seemed part of him. A thumb-nail of a pilot fish wriggled just ahead of the shark's snout, miraculously staying in place as the shark advanced. A compressibility wave probably held him there. If he tumbled out of it, he would be hopelessly left behind.

It was some time before we realized that the shark and his courtiers were not afraid of us.

I was happy to have such an opportunity to film a shark, although, as the first surprise passed, a sense of danger came. Shark and company slowly circled us. I became the film director, making signs to Dumas, who was co-starred with the shark.

Dumas obligingly swam along behind the brute. He reached out his hand and grasped the tip of the tail fin, undecided about giving it a good pull. That would make a good shot, but it might also be dangerous. Dumas released the tail and pursued the shark round and round, while I whirled in the centre. The shark made no hostile move, but his hard little eyes were on us.

The shark gradually led us down to sixty feet. Dumas pointed below. From the abyss, two more sharks climbed towards us: fifteen-footers, slender, steel-blue animals with a more savage appearance. The blue pair levelled off below us.

Our old friend, the grey shark, was getting closer to us, tightening his slowly revolving circle. But he still seemed manageable. He turned reliably in his clockwise prow and the pilots held their stations.

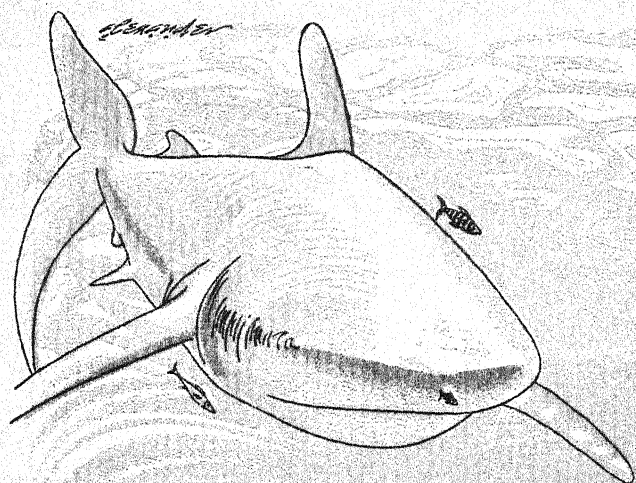
The blue pair from the abyss still hung back.

Below the blue sharks there appeared great tunas. Perhaps they had been there since the beginning, but it was the first time we noticed them. Above us flying fish gambolled, adding a discordant touch of gaiety.

Dumas and I ransacked our memories for advice on how to frighten off sharks. "*Gesticulate wildly.*" We flailed our arms. The grey one did not falter. "*Give 'em a flood of bubbles.*" Dumas waited until the shark had reached his nearest point and released a heavy exhalation. The shark did not react. "*Shout as loud as you can.*" We hooted until our voices cracked. The shark appeared deaf. His cold, tranquil eye appraised us. He seemed to know what he wanted and was in no hurry.

A small dreadful thing occurred. The tiny pilot fish on the shark's snout tumbled off his station and wriggled to Dumas. It was a long journey for the little fellow, quite long enough for us to speculate on his purpose. Dumas shook his head as if to dodge a mosquito. The mite fluttered happily, moving with the mask, inside which Didi's eyes focused in cross-eyed agony. I saw his hand held out clutching his belt knife.

The grey shark retreated some distance, turned, then glided at us head-on.



The final moment had come. I had my hand on the camera button and without my knowledge I was filming the oncoming killer. The flat snout grew larger and then before me there was only the head. I was flooded with anger. With all my strength I thrust the camera forward and banged his muzzle. I felt the wash of a heavy body flashing past and the shark was twelve feet away, circling us as slowly as before, unharmed and expressionless. I thought, *Why in hell doesn't he go to the whale? The nice juicy whale. What did we ever do to him?*

The blue sharks now climbed up and joined us. Dumas and I decided to take a chance on the surface. We swam up and thrust our masks out of the water. Dizzy and disoriented from spinning round under water, we had to revolve our heads like a lighthouse beacon to find the *Élie Monnier*, three hundred yards away. We waved wildly and saw no reply from the ship. Floating on the surface with one's head out of the water is the classic method of being eaten by sharks: hanging there, one's legs can be plucked like bananas.

I looked down. The three sharks were rising towards us in a concerted attack.

We dived and faced them. The sharks resumed their circling manoeuvre.

We were nearing exhaustion, and cold was penetrating the outer layers of our bodies. Any moment we expected the constriction of air in our mouthpieces, a sign that the air supply is nearly gone. When it was gone, we would abandon our mouthpieces and make mask dives, holding our breath. That would redouble the drain on our strength, and leave us facing tireless creatures that never needed breath.

Suddenly the movements of the sharks grew agitated. They ran round us, working all their strong propulsive fins, then turned down and disappeared. Dumas and I stared unbelievably at each other. A shadow fell across us. We looked up and saw the hull of the *Élie Monnier's* launch. Our mates had seen our signals and had located our bubbles.

The sharks ran when they saw the launch.

We flopped into the boat, weak and shaken. The crew were as distraught as we were. We could not believe what they told us: we had been in the water only twenty minutes.

Later, we watched the sharks twisting in the red water, striking furiously at the dead whale. We hoisted the whale aboard and were impressed by the moon-shaped shark bites. The inch-thick leather of the whale had been scooped out cleanly, ten or fifteen pounds of blubber at a bite.

The sharks had waited until they were cheated out of us before they struck the easy prey.

Most of our dives have had a specific purpose—wreck exploration, photography, or marine research. But occasionally we were able to steal hours just for dawdling in the sea, hours when a man could expose his senses to the nuances of colour and light, listen for the lonely creaks of the ocean and finger the water like a voluptuary. Then one realized the privilege of crossing the barrier between elements.

The sea is a silent jungle, in which the diver's sounds are keenly heard—the soft roar of exhalations, the lisp of incoming air and the hoots of a comrade.

We have noticed that shouting at fish does not perturb them, but pressure waves generated by rubber foot fins seem to have a distinct influence. To approach fish we move our legs in a liquid sluggish stroke, expressing a peaceful intention. A nervous or rapid kick will empty the area of fish, even those which cannot see us. The alarm spreads in successive explosions; one small fleeing creature is enough to frighten the others. The water trembles with emergency.

We will pass casually through a landscape where all sorts of fish are enjoying life and accepting us placidly. Then, without an untoward move on our part, the area will be deserted of all fish. Were porpoises beating up pressure waves out of sight, or were hungry dentex marauding off in the mists? All we know, hanging in the abandoned space, is that some inaudible raid siren has sent all but us to shelter.

We feel like deaf men. With all senses attuned to the sea, we are still without the sixth sense, perhaps the most important of all in under-sea existence.

Fish have different ways of showing their curiosity. Often while swimming along we will turn back abruptly and see the muzzles of echelons of creatures following us with avid interest. The dentex gives us a passing glance of contempt. The sea bass approaches us, investigates and swims away.

Not so with the merou, a Mediterranean grouper which attains a weight up to a hundred pounds. He is found near the coast in thirty feet of turbulent water, close to the rock forts in which he lives. The merou is the ocean's scholar, sincerely interested in our species. He approaches and looks at us with large, touching eyes, full of puzzlement, and stays to survey us. He and his fellows sit below and look up full in our faces. When we move they shake themselves and leap to new vantage points. When at last they go back to their rocky homes, they watch us from their doors and run to a window to see us depart.

The merou has a special and familiar place in our under-sea experience. We feel sure that we could make one a pet.

AT SOME points along the southern coast of France there are vertical reefs two hundred feet deep. Mountain climbers who have gone down the reefs with us are surprised at the abrupt changes of environment. Going up a mountain one struggles through miles of foot-hills, through extended zones of trees to the snow-line, to the tree-line and into the thin air. On the reef the changes from one zone to another are bewilderingly rapid. The top ten fathoms, lighted by sunny lace from the surface, are populated with nervous darting fish. Then one enters a strange country upon which dusk has fallen at noon, an autumnal clime with an atmosphere like that of a smoky industrial town.

Gliding down the rock façade one comes to the next layer and grows tense for the leap into winter. Inside the dull dark cold one forgets the sun. Mossy rocks are replaced by Gothic stones, pierced and elaborately ornamented. Each vault and arcade is a little

world with a sandy beach and a tableau of fish.

Deeper down are miniature blue trees with white blossoms. These are the real coral, the *corallium rubrum* in brittle limestone fantasies of form.

For centuries coral was commercially dredged in the Mediterranean with "coral crosses," a wooden drag that smashed down the trees and recovered a few branches. The once-thick trees on the floor that may have taken hundreds of years to grow are no more. The surviving coral grows below twenty fathoms in protected recesses and grottoes, accumulating from the ceiling like stalactites. It may be gathered only by divers.

A diver entering a coral cave must be aware of its appearance in the sea's deceiving colour filter. The coral branches appear blue-black. They are covered with pale blossoms that retract and disappear when disturbed.

In the zone of red coral, black-striped lobster horns protrude from the lacunae of the reefs. When a diver's hand comes near, the lobster stirs with a dry grating sound.

On the rocks are living tumours and growths resembling udders, long fleshy threads, chalice-shaped formations, and forms like mushrooms. They have supernatural colours—the violet of wine dregs, blue-blacks, yellowish-greens, all muted and greyed, but somehow vibrant.

Now, at the base of the reef, the sand begins, monotonously receding into the floor. There, on the border of life, nothing grows or crawls. One moves automatically without brain directives. In the recesses of the brain, one revives an old notion—to return to the surface. The drugged state disappears on the rise along the wall, the departure from a discoloured land, a country that has never shown its real face.

"WHY in the world do you want to go down into the sea?" is a question we are often asked.

A famous mountain climber was once asked why he wanted to scale a hazardous peak. His answer serves for us:

"Because it is there."

But there is a practical reason also.

Since ancient times lonely men have tried to penetrate the sea. There are Assyrian bas-reliefs of men attempting impossible submersions while sucking on goat-skin bellows. Leonardo da Vinci sketched several impractical ideas for diving lungs. Elizabethan craftsmen tinkered with leather suits for diving.

Now the human population is increasing so rapidly and land resources are being depleted at such a rate that we must take sustenance from the great abundance of the sea. There is no choice in the matter: the yield of the sea is vital. The necessity of developing means for taking its mineral and chemical resources becomes more apparent every day. We are obsessed with the incredible realm of oceanic life waiting to be known.

"Why in the world do you want to go down into the sea?"

We answer: "Because we feel the sea age is soon to come."



Capt. J. Y. Cousteau



CAPTAIN JACQUES-YVES COUSTEAU, at present on four years' leave from the French Navy, is in command of one of the most ambitious marine-research expeditions in history. Its main purpose is the study of oceanography by means of the new Cousteau-Girardot submarine cinecamera. Six short films and a full-length colour motion picture have been completed since the research group set sail in 1951. The chief diver of the expedition is Frédéric Dumas, who collaborated with Captain Cousteau in writing *The Silent World*.

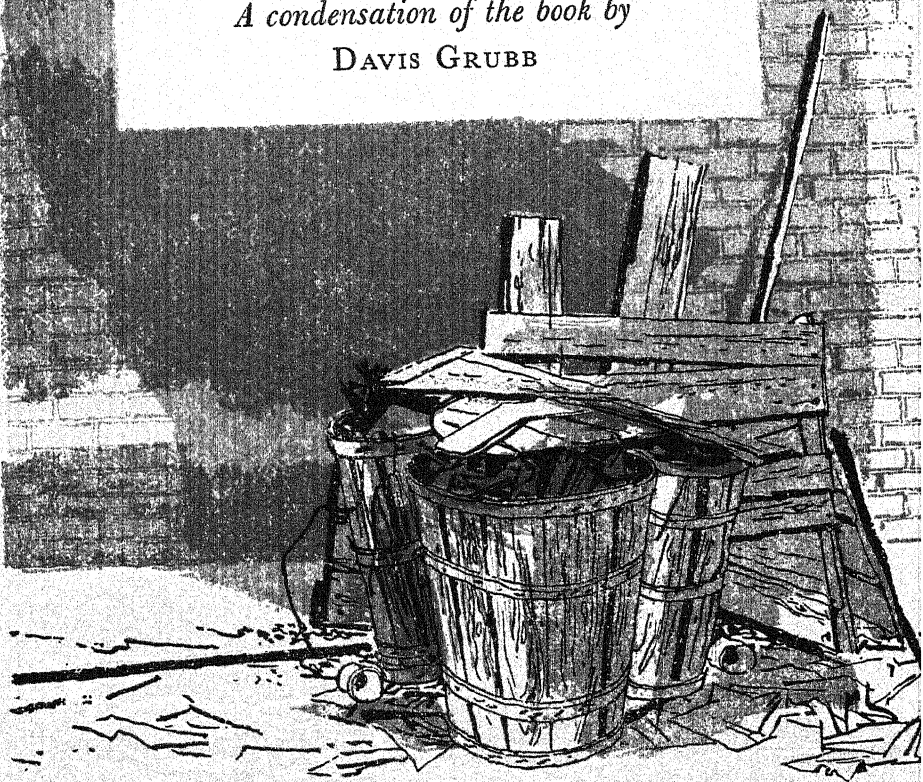
When Captain Cousteau is at home he and his wife, Simone, with their two sons, live in Paris, or at their lovely villa on the cliffs above the Mediterranean, at Sanary-sur-mer.



Illustrations by *LS Glanzman*

THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER

A condensation of the book by
DAVIS GRUBB

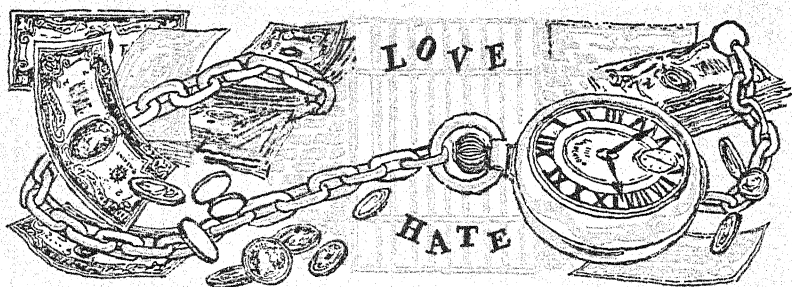


"The Night of the Hunter" is published by Hamish Hamilton, London

The Night of the Hunter is a tale calculated to chill the reader's blood on one page and warm his heart on the next. Written with the poetic simplicity of a shanty-boat ballad, it is a study in human terror and the sublime courage of childhood. The time is the early 1930's; the place a "haunted and haunting" region of the Ohio River Valley. The story concerns two young children who find themselves saddled with a dark and precious secret, and the ruthless "hunter" who is determined to wrest it from them. Violence and unrelenting suspense are tempered always with gentleness and an extraordinary appreciation of the ways of children. For this is a story of people at that moment in their lives when they are small and no one understands their fears—when no one realizes that the shadow at the bedroom window is really a tiger and not merely an oak tree's branches; that the creak of sleeping rooms is the step of Doom itself; and that every midnight beneath a child's counterpane is the night of the hunter.

"An absolute corker of a book."

—Richard Usborne, *B.B.C.*



I: *The Hanging Man*

A CHILD's hand and a piece of chalk had made it: a careful, child's scrawl of white lines on the red bricks of the wall beside Jander's Livery Stable: a crude pair of sticks for the gallows tree, a thick broken line for the rope and then the scarecrow of the hanging man. Some passing by along that road did not see it at all; others saw it and remembered what it meant and thought solemn thoughts and turned their eyes to the house down the river road. The little children—the poor little children. Theirs were the eyes for which the crude picture was intended and they had seen it and heard along Peacock Alley the mocking child rhyme that went with it. And now, in the kitchen of that stricken house, they ate their breakfast in silence. Then Pearl stopped suddenly and frowned at her brother.

"John, finish your mush."

John scowled, pressing his lips together, while their mother stared out of the window into the yellow March morning that flowered in the dried honeysuckle along the window. A winter sun shot glistening rays among the early mists from the river.

"John, eat your mush."

"Be quiet, Pearl!" cried Willa, mother of them. "Leave John be. Eat your own breakfast and hush!"

"You're only four and a half, Pearl," John said. "And I'm nine. And you got no right telling me."

Then Pearl remembered again the picture on the stone wall beside Jander's Livery Stable down at Cresap's Landing. She made them listen to the song about the hanging man.

"Hing Hang Hung! See what the hangman done!" chanted the little girl, and Willa, whirling, struck the child so that the four marks of her fingers were pink in the small flesh.

"Don't you ever sing that! Ever! Ever! Ever!"

Pearl would have wept but it seemed to her that now, at last, she might get to the heart of the matter and so withheld the tears. "Why?" she whispered. "Why can't I sing that song? The kids down at Cresap's Landing sing it. And John said——"

"Never you mind about what John said. As if my cross wasn't hard enough to bear without my own children—his own children—mocking me with it! Now hush!"

"Where's Dad? Why won't you tell? John knows."

"Hush! Hush your mouth this minute!"

Willa struck the child's plump arm again as if, in so doing, she might in some way obliterate her own torment and despair. Now Pearl wept in soft, faint gasps, and clutching her old doll waddled off, breathless with outrage, into the cold hallway of the winter house. John ate on in pale indifference, yet obscurely pleased with the justice. Willa glared pathetically at him.

"And I don't want you telling her, John," she whispered hoarsely. "I don't want her ever to know."

He made no reply, eating with a child's coarse gusto: smacking his lips over the crackling mush and maple syrup. Despite the truth which loomed in his small world like a fairy-book ogre, despite the awareness which for so many weeks had crowded out all other sentiments, he could not help finding a kind of cruel and mischievous joy as the lilt and ring of Pearl's chant pranced like a hurdy-gurdy clown in his head: Hing Hang Hung! See what the hangman done. Hung Hang Hing! See the robber swing.

"I'm going up to Moundsville to see your Dad," Willa said. "Lunch is in the pantry. I'll be home to get you supper but I might

not get back till late. John, I want you to mind Pearl today. And mind what else I told you. Don't breathe a word about—you know."

"No'm."

Hing Hang Hung, he thought absently. Hung Hang Hing! See the robber swing. Hing Hang Hung! Now my song is done.

Willa by the brown mirror over the old chest of drawers tucked her chestnut curls into the wide straw hat.

"Can Pearl and me play the pianola?"

"Yes, but mind you don't tear the rolls. They was your Dad's favourites." She caught her breath, choking back a sob as she powdered her nose slowly and stared back into the wild, grieving eyes in the mirror. Why, it was almost as if Ben would ever hear them again: those squeaky, wheezy old pianola rolls, almost as if he had just gone off on a fishing trip and would soon be back to play them and laugh and there would be those good old times again.

"And don't let Pearl play with the kitchen matches!" she cried and was gone out of the door into the bitter morning. When the grey door was closed, John stood listening for the rising whine of the old Model T. Pearl appeared in the hall doorway with the ancient doll in her arms, its chipped and corroded face not unlike her own just now that was streaked with tears in faint, gleaming stains down her plump cheeks.

"Come on, Pearl," John said, cheerfully. "I'll let you play the pianola." She stumped solemnly along behind him into the darkened parlour amid the ghostly shapes of the muslin-draped furniture gathered all round like fat old summer women. John opened the window blind an inch to shed a bar of pale winter light on the stack of long boxes where the rolls were hidden. Pearl squatted and stretched a fat hand to take one.

"No," he said gently. "Let me, Pearl. Mom said they wasn't to be tore—and besides you can't read what them names say!"

Pearl sighed and waited.

"Now this here one is a real pretty one," he announced presently. And he fitted the roll into the slot and snapped the paper into the clip of the wooden roll beneath and solemnly commenced

pumping the pedal with his stubby shoes. The ancient instrument seemed to suck in its breath. There was a hiss and a whisper in the silence before it commenced to clamour. John thought sombrely: That's "Carolina In The Morning." That was one of Dad's favourites. And he could remember the times when they had all listened to it when Ben was there, when they were together, and he knew where the tear was in the roll and the keys would speak out in a chord of confusion and then go rollicking off again into the mad, happy tune. Pearl hugged the old doll close and sucked her finger, and when the tune was done she sighed. "More?"

"No," sighed John glumly, shuffling away into the kitchen, his heart heavy with thoughts of the good old times that were gone. "I don't feel like it, Pearl."

She followed in his footsteps like a lost lamb, hugging the old doll tight as if it might some day be her last comfort, and she stood beside him at the kitchen window, nose squashed flat to the icy pane. The hanging man. Yes, they could see him dimly even now—far away down the frozen road amid the winter mists—the little white man on the red bricks. He had not gone away in the night.

"Hing Hang Hung!" whispered Pearl, softly. For she knew that John would never strike her. John scowled and sketched a hing-ing hang-ing man on the foggy window pane. "You better never let Mom catch you singing that song."

"Why won't she tell, John?"

He said nothing, sucking his lip. He would have loved nothing more than to tell her. Since the day when the blue men had taken Ben away the burden of this solitary knowledge was almost more than he could endure. It was not a knowing that he could share with anyone. It was a secret that was a little world of its own.

BEN lay back in the bunk and smiled. Preacher has stopped talking now. Preacher just sits there across the cell from Ben with those black eyes boring into him. Preacher is trying to guess. Not that Ben hasn't told Preacher everything that he told the others at the trial. Everything, that is, but the one thing they wanted the most to know. Ben won't tell that to anybody. But it is a kind of

game: teasing Preacher who ain't a real one at all. Ben tells him the story over and over again and Preacher sits hunched, heeding each word, waiting for the slip that never comes.

"Because I was just plumb tired of being poor. That's the large and small of it, Preacher. Just sick to death of drawing that little pay envelope at the hardware store in Moundsville every Friday and then when I'd go over to Mister Smiley's bank on pay-day he'd open that little drawer with all the green tens and fifties and hundreds in it and every time I'd look at it there I'd just fairly choke to think of the things it would buy Willa and them kids of mine. It wasn't just for me that I wanted it."

"You killed two men, Ben!"

"That's right, Preacher. One day I oiled up that little Smith and Wesson that Mr. Blankensop keeps in his roll-top desk at the hardware store and I went up to Mister Smiley's bank and I pointed that gun at Mister Smiley and the teller Corey South and I said for Corey to hand me over that big stack of hundred-dollar bills. Lord, you never seen such a wad, Preacher!"

"Ten thousand dollars' worth, Ben Harper!"

"Then Mister Smiley said I was crazy and Corey South went for his gun in the drawer and with that I shot him and Mister Smiley both and while I was reaching through to get that green stack of hundreds out of Corey's dead fingers Mister Smiley got the gun and lifted up on the floor and shot me through the shoulder. Well, sir, I run and got scared and didn't know which was up or down before long and so I just got in the car and come home. They come down the river after me about four that afternoon—Sheriff Wiley Tomlinson and four policemen."

"And where was you, Ben?"

"Why, I was there, Preacher. You see I was done running. I was just standing out back by the smoke-house with them two youngsters of mine—John and that little sweetheart Pearl."

"And the money, Ben? What about that ten thousand dollars? Listen to me, Ben Harper! It'll do you no good where you're going. What good is money in heaven or hell either one? Eh, boy?"

Ben is silent. Preacher walks away and stands for a spell staring out of the cell window with his long, skinny hands folded behind him. Ben looks at those hands and shivers. What kind of a man would have his fingers tattooed that way? he thinks. The fingers of the right hand, each one with a blue letter beneath the grey, evil skin—L—O—V—E. And the fingers of the left hand done the same way only now the letters spell out H—A—T—E. What kind of a man? What kind of a preacher? Ben muses and wonders softly and remembers the quick-leaping blade of the spring knife that Preacher keeps hidden in the soiled blanket of his bed. But Preacher would never use that knife on Ben. Preacher wants to know about that money and you can't use a knife to get at something like that. Now Preacher stands by Ben's bunk.

"Set your soul right, Ben Harper! That money's bloodied with Satan's own curses now. And the only way it can get cleared of it is to let it do His works in the hands of good, honest, poor folks."

"Like you, Preacher?"

"I serve the Lord in my humble way, Ben."

"Then how come they got you locked up in Moundsville penitentiary, Preacher? And how come you got that stick knife?"

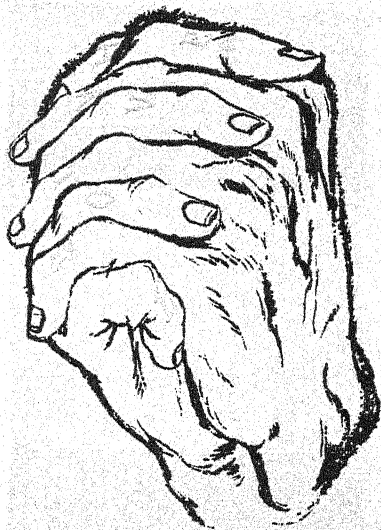
"I come not with peace but with a sword! I smuggled it in right under the noses of them damned guards. That sword has served me through many an evil time, Ben Harper."

"I'll bet it has, Preacher," grins Ben and presently Preacher goes up into his bunk and lies there a while longer muttering to himself and scheming up new ways to get Ben to tell him where he hid that ten thousand dollars in green hundreds. It's a game between them. In three days they are coming to take Ben up to the death house and a body has to keep busy with little games like this to keep from losing his mind at the last. Ben Harper and Preacher round the clock—day after day. And Ben Harper knows that it is a game that he will win. Because Preacher can talk the breath out of his body and Ben will never tell a mortal, living soul. But Preacher keeps on; stubborn, unremitting. In the quaking silence of the prison night: "Listen, Ben! Where you're goin' it won't serve you none. Tell me, boy! Buy your way to Paradise now! You

hear, boy? Tell me! Have a heart!"

"Go to sleep, Preacher!"

"Listen, Ben! See this hand I'm holdin' up? See them letters tattooed on it? Love, Ben, love! That's what they spell! This hand—this right hand of mine—this hand is Love. But wait, Ben! Look! There's enough moonlight from the window to see. This left hand! Hate, Ben, hate! Now here's the moral, boy. These two hands are the soul of mortal man! Hate and love, Ben—warring one against the other——"



Ben listens to the familiar recital; shudders with a kind of curious delight as Preacher writhes the fingers of his tattooed hands together and twists them horribly, cracking the knuckles as the fingers grapple one hand with the other. And now he brings both hands down with a climactic crash on the wooden bench by the bunks. Then he is silent, crouched in the darkness, waiting to see if his little drama has done anything to the boy in the lower bunk.

"I could build a tabernacle, Ben," he whimpers. "Think of it, Ben. A tabernacle built with that ten thousand dollars of cursed, bloodied gold. Thousands of sinners flocking in because you give that money to build a temple. Listen to me, boy. . . ."

Ben rises on his elbow, tired of the game now. "Shut up, Preacher! Shut up and go to sleep before I climb over there and stuff your bed tick down your throat!"

Silence again. Preacher up there in the darkness with those tattooed fingers criss-crossed behind his sandy, shaggy head thinking how he can worm it out of Ben Harper with only three days to the death house. Ben stuffs his knuckles into his teeth till he tastes

blood. He is quaking with agony beneath the little dream that the night's blue fingers reach out to him. Once more it is that winter afternoon by the house up the road from Cresap's Landing. He is looking into the moon faces of the children: Pearl stony and silent as a graveyard cherub and John's big eyes wide with everything Ben was telling him, while Pearl clutched the doll against her body.

"Where you goin' to, Dad?"

"Away, John! Away!"

"You're bleedin', Dad."

"It's nothin', boy. Just a scratched shoulder."

"But there's blood, Dad."

"Hush, John! Mind what I told you to do. And you, Pearl. You, too. Mind now! You swore!"

Now, from the corner of his eye, Ben sees the blue men with the guns in the big touring car coming down the road beyond the corner of the orchard. John's mouth breaks and trembles but then it tightens back into thinness again. He makes no sound.

"Just mind everything I told you, John. And take good care of Pearl. Guard her with your life, boy."

"Yes, Dad."

"Who's them men?" whispers Pearl at last.

"Never mind them. They come and I'm goin' off with them, children. Don't even waste time thinkin' about that now. Just mind what I told you—mind what you swore to do, boy! Swear to it again, John. Swear, boy!"

"I swear! I swear!"

Ben Harper lies in his bunk now with the sweat beaded like morning dew on his forehead. He does not move lest Preacher sense that he is awake, frightened beyond all reason or caution, and think that now is the time to end his quest for knowledge of the hidden money. He closes his eyes, thinking of the day just ended. His wife Willa had been allowed to see him that morning. He looked at her there on the other side of the chicken wire and wanted to say things to her that he hadn't felt for a longer time than he could remember. Back in the spring of 1928 they had run

off to Elkton, Maryland, and got married. He had dreamed of the life they would have together in the house down in the bottom lands above Cresap's Landing and how he would get himself a rise at the hardware store and buy her a player piano. It was funny how it had always been a matter of money. Right up to the very end. Even that day at the prison she kept asking about it—the ten thousand dollars he had hidden somewhere. She kept saying again and again that it wasn't going to do him any good and he had no right to leave her and the two kids without anything. But he would not tell. And it made him sick in his stomach to sit there on the other side of the chicken wire and see her mouth saying it over and over again until her face began to look for all the world like the face of Preacher; weak and sick with greed; the same greed that had led him to murder and the gallows.

That same afternoon Mr. McGlumphey, his lawyer, had been to see him, too. Mr. McGlumphey had told him at the outset that it would go easier with him if he was to tell what he'd done with that ten thousand dollars and it was really then that Ben had made up his mind not to tell. Because any poor fool could see that it wasn't Justice they were after—it was the ten thousand dollars. It was Sin and Greed that had brought him to Moundsville and it was Sin and Greed that was making them hang him. It was the face of Willa begging and wheedling behind the chicken wire. It was the face of Mr. McGlumphey arguing. It was the voice of Preacher in the dark.

"Where? Where, Ben? Where? Have a heart, boy?"

He awoke. The corner of the moon was gone from the window. The blue square was empty except for the ragged thatch of Preacher's head inches from his own. Ben gathered himself slowly under his blanket and let his muscles coil like a steel spring and then lashed out with all his strength until he felt his hard fist strike the whispering face.

"Ben, you hadn't ought to have hit me! I'm a man of God!"

"You're a lying crook! Sneaking up and whispering in my ear while I'm sleeping! Hoping you could make me talk about it in my sleep. Damn you, Preacher!"

"You shouldn't have done it, boy! I'm a man of the Lord!"

"You're a slobberin' hypocrite, Preacher! Now get back up in your bunk before I smash your head in! I'd as soon hang for three killin's as two!" Ben lay rigid now, listening as the other scrambled fearfully up into the rustling straw tick and fell back, mopping his bleeding nose and whimpering.

Next morning when he woke to the siren's vast, echoing contralto, he looked across the cell at Preacher, and saw his nose was swollen from the blow. Ben laughed out loud. Nothing would ever stop Preacher. Already the glitter was back in those hunting eyes; already the question was forming again behind those thin, mad lips. A feller almost had to hand it to Preacher.

"Ben?"

"What, Preacher?"

"I'll be leaving this place in another month. You'll be dead then, Ben. Dead and gone to make your peace. Now if you was to tell me, boy, it might go easier. Why, Ben, with that ten thousand dollars I could build a tabernacle that would make the Wheeling Island place look like a chicken house! I'd even name it after you, boy! The Ben Harper Tabernacle! How's that sound?"

"Keep talkin', Preacher."

"The Lord might feel kindly turned towards you, Ben! The Lord might say: What's a little murder——"

"Would you have free candy for the kids, Preacher? Would you give out free eats to all the poor folks that was hungry, Preacher?"

"If you say so, boy. It'd be your tabernacle. All them poor souls out there wanderin' around hungry in this terr'ble depression."

Ben Harper grins. "Keep talkin', Preacher," he chuckles. "Keep talkin'!"

AND THE other one had his dreams, too. He would lie there in the dark and when he wasn't thinking about new ways to make Ben talk he would think about the women. He could never be exactly sure how many there had been. Sometimes there were twelve and sometimes it was only six and then again they would all blend together into one and her face would rise up in his

dreams, and not until his hand stole under his blanket and round the bone hasp of the faithful knife did the face dissolve and flee back into the darkness again. He was quite bad at remembering facts, dates, places. And yet fragments would return with shocking verisimilitude: the broken shards of forgotten times, lost names, dead faces. God sent people to him. God told him what to do. And it was always a widow that God brought to him. A widow with a little wad of money in the dining-room sugar bowl and perhaps a little more in the county bank. And when it was all over and done with there was not so much as a single scarlet droplet on the leaves in the pleasant woods where it had ended and the Sword of Jehovah was wiped clean again—ready again.

Through the leafy, tranquil decade of the 1920's he had wandered among the river hamlets and the mill towns of Ohio and Kentucky and Indiana doing his work quietly and without fuss or ostentation. Perhaps it was his very indifference to being caught that kept them from ever nailing him for anything but the car theft in Parkersburg that had sent him to the state penitentiary. Sometimes he found his widows in the lonely hearts columns of the pulp love-story magazines. Always widows. Fat, simpering widows who flirted and fluttered their eyelashes and fumbled for his hand with plump fingers. And afterwards there was the little roll of money; money to go forth and preach among a world of harlots and fools.

Wandering the land, he preached. His name was Harry Powell but everyone called him Preacher and sometimes that was the only word he would scrawl in the smudged hotel registers. In his dollar hotel room he would crouch beneath the guttering blossom of the gas flame above the brass bed and count his resources and think to himself: Time to go out again and preach the word? Or is it time for another one? Is it time yet, Lord? Time for another widow? Just say the word, Lord, and I'm on my way!

The faces troubled him at night; not with remorse but with self-rebuke at the imprecision of his arithmetic. Were there twelve? Or was it six? Was this the face of the gaunt, bony India Coverly from Steubenville or was it the other one—her ancient, senile

sister Ella that he had had to kill because she had surprised him burying the old woman in the peach orchard behind the barn? The faces ran together like the years; like the long rides in the yellow-lit railway coaches through the clicking river midnights as he wandered from town to town. Lord, won't I never settle down? Won't my work never be done?

And he would plunge into the lonely hearts column again or search the faces at a church picnic and when he came to the right one—he *knew*. Then they arrested him for stealing that Essex in Parkersburg and sent him to the state penitentiary for a year. But the Lord sure knew what he was doing all right. He had sent him to the state penitentiary to this very cell because a man named Ben Harper was going to die. A man with a widow in the making and ten thousand dollars hidden somewhere down river.

The day they came and took Ben Harper up to the death house Preacher stood screaming after him, his knuckles white round the shaking bars of the cell.

"Ben! Ben, boy! It ain't too late, boy! Where, Ben? Where, boy?"

But Ben Harper did not call back. The game was over.

THREE weeks after Ben Harper's hanging Walt Spoon gave Willa a job waiting on tables and counter at his little ice-cream parlour at Cresap's Landing. The job paid five dollars a week plus meals. The Spoons needed no help. It was a kindness. The first morning Willa left for work the children watched at the window as she walked the short stretch of river road to the Landing.

"Get your hat and coat, Pearl," John said. "We're goin' out of doors."

Pearl stood patiently while he buttoned up her ragged brown coat and tucked her silly brown curls into the little goblin's cap. She clutched her doll Jenny throughout and snuffled wearily with an old winter's cold until John fetched out his own handkerchief and tended to her nose.

"Now," he said. "That ought to keep you warm. Come on, Pearl!"



He shivered when he opened the kitchen door and the March air, piercing and drenched with river cold, swept over them. They stumped silently along up the road to Cresap's Landing, aimless before the long morning. Before the window of Miz Cunningham's second-hand store they paused. John made no sound. Because there was no sound in the world that one might sensibly make while staring through this particular window; there was no word for total wonder.

"What are you looking at, John? Are you going to buy it, John?"

But Pearl would not have understood even if he had tried to tell her and so he continued to stare through the window at the dusty shelf where the silver pocket watch lay, winking dully among the gimcracks and buttons and fake diamond stickpins and the old campaign badges. Then, abruptly, there was a motion among the vast panoply of miserable coats and trousers that served as backdrop to the window shelf and the cunning and dissipated face of an

old woman appeared and blinked down at the children in the street. Behind the winking lenses of her crooked spectacles the face of Miz Cunningham was that of an ancient and querulous turkey hen.

Her dirty hands fluttered in appalling gaiety to the children and then, disappearing momentarily, she scurried round to the door which presently opened with a single cry of a little bell, like a ragged golden bird.

"Ah-hhh! If it ain't the poor little Harper lambs!"

John said nothing. Pearl was pleased and put her forefinger coyly to her lips.

"And how is your poor, poor mother this sad winter?"

"She's up at Spoons'," said John, quite cold and matter-of-fact about it. He let his eyes stray again to the wonderful silver watch.

Hing Hang Hung! the words rang faintly through his day-dreams like echoes of Miz Cunningham's tart little doorbell. Then he looked again at the old woman herself. Why, she was really quite wonderful—this old fat woman! In the end, she got her hands on nearly everything in the world! Just look at her window! There by the pair of old overshoes were Jamey Hankins' ice skates. There was old Walt Spoon's elk's tooth. There—his mother's own wedding ring! There was a world in that window of this remarkable old woman.

"I'll just bet my two little lambs would like a nice hot cup of coffee!" cried the old woman, fidgeting at her iron spectacles with three fat fingers. "Eh, now?"

"I don't care," said John gravely.

Miz Cunningham's kitchen, like her show window, was like the nest of a thieving black crow. Old clothes hanging on the water pipes and stove door handles. Old shoes in boxes by the door. Old hats in apple baskets beneath the window sill. John and Pearl sat moon-eyed at the littered table while Miz Cunningham fetched her blue-speckled coffee-pot and poured them each half-cupfuls.

"Now!" she exclaimed heartily, settling down for a bit of dandelion wine for her stomach and a breath of gossip for her dusty ears. "Tell me how your poor, poor mother is enduring. I mean

about the poor father and all. Ah, poor little lambs! The Lord tends you both these days."

At this poetic outburst the old face screwed suddenly awry, one eye twitched as water appeared above the rheumy lid and trickled in unabashed emotion down the sagging, powdered cheek.

"There now, my pets," she snuffled, "I'm all right. It's all over in a minute. It's nothing! It's just that it tears the heart out of a body's very breast to see young lambs fatherless and that pretty mother widowed at thirty. Ah, and I knowed your Dad. Yes-sirree, my lambkins! I knowed him like my own."

John did not listen as the old woman's voice rose in anguished retrospect. He thought again of the watch in the window. But Miz Cunningham's hen voice came picking its yellow bill through the dream that covered him.

"Didn't they never find out what Ben Harper done with all that money he stole?"

She grimaced and squinted in cunning speculation as if she were bargaining for a pretty gold pin.

"Poor, poor Ben! Gracious me, such a lot of money he took that day from poor dead Mister Corey! And to think that when they caught him—why, there wasn't so much as a penny of it to be seen! Now what do you make of that? Eh, boy?"

John sighed. He stood up and took Pearl by the hand. "Pearl and me," he said. "We have to go."

"Eh? What's say? Why, you ain't even touched your coffee!"

John gathered into his fingers the soft little pads of Pearl's hand and led her back the way they had come, through the mournful forest of dangling coats and empty grey dresses. Away in the dusty shadows shone the door, the light of winter in the street. Behind him John could hear the old woman wheezing and snuffling among the fusty garments in his wake. "Great day in the morning!" she exclaimed. "For a boy who don't know nothin' about that money you sure pick up and run right quick when a body——"

He squeezed Pearl's small fingers till she whined in pain and pulled them free and ran ahead, hugging her old loose doll tight

against her. At the doorway threshold the fat, ring-crusted fingers clamped tight on John's quaking shoulders and swung him round full face. "If you was to tell *me*!" the old voice croaked, all guile and oil gone from it now. "Why, then there wouldn't be no one to know but us three, boy! Eh, now? Do you know where the money's hid? Did your Dad tell you where? Does your mother know? Eh, boy? Did you see where it was hid?"

"No!" cried John, and twisted free.

The iron bell uttered its harsh and broken cry as they hurried out on to the road again. The old owl face squinted again from among the dusty sleeves in the window racks.

"She's bad," observed Pearl. "I don't like Miz Cunningham."

John caught her hand and began walking her swiftly up towards the river road and the solace of home. It had begun to snow and the wind grieved in the stark river trees—a wind like a moaning song—a wind like a hunter's horn.

At six Walt Spoon fetched a kitchen match from his waistcoat and lighted the two gas lamps behind the marble counter. There were no customers in the place now but when the first movie let out at the Orpheum two or three couples would drift in for some of Ikey's homemade ice-cream. Now Walt heard footsteps echoing up the bricks of the path and turned. It was Willa, her nose cherry-red with cold.

"Git them two kids fed and bedded down, did ye?" cried Walt.

"Yes, Mr. Spoon," she smiled.

"Better go back to the kitchen and let Ikey give you a cup of hot coffee!"

He followed her with his gaze, wondering what kindly thing one might say to a woman whose husband had been hanged for murder. She was so remote; going about, doing her work well and yet so hidden away from everything that happened around her. He followed her miserably to the kitchen and watched from the doorway as she helped herself to coffee at the stove.

"Here, honey," scolded Ikey. "Let me git you that. Set down and give your feet a rest."

Icey Spoon was fat and pleasant. Most of her sixty years had been spent cooking good things: tasting pots of boiling fudge, sampling fingerfuls of batter or thick ice-cream on the wooden paddles of the old crank freezer.

"Willa!" she snapped cheerfully. "What you need is a little meat on your bones." She shuffled off to the ice-cream freezers. Presently she returned with a heaped dish of the chocolate cream and set it firmly at Willa's elbow. "There! A dish of that two or three times a day and you'll commence to shape into something a feller might want to look twice at."

Willa thanked her and glanced uneasily at the old woman's eyes, knowing well what it was all leading up to.

"Honey," said Icey Spoon, waving her husband away from the kitchen and settling her thick, dimpled elbows firmly on the table, "there is certain plain facts of life that adds up. And one of them is this. No woman is good enough to raise growin' youngsters alone. The Lord meant that job for two. Now then! There ain't so many single fellers nor widowers in Cresap's Landing that a girl can afford to get too choosy. There's——"

"Icey, I don't want a husband."

"Want nothin'!" cried Icey, slamming her palm on the table till the sugar bowl chattered. "It's not a matter of wantin' or not wantin'! You're no spring chicken, Willa Harper. You're a grown woman widowed with two little youngins and it's them you should be thinkin' about."

"John—the boy," said Willa. "He minds Pearl. He takes awful good care of her, Icey."

"Mindin' girls ain't no fit business for a growin' boy neither."

Willa shrugged. "It's not so easy," she said softly. "Finding someone—not every man wants the widow of a man who——"

"—a man who done somethin' ornery and foolish!" snapped Icey. "Ben Harper warn't no common robber. Why, I knowed him as well as I knowed my own five boys and I'd have put him up alongside any one of them. It's these hard, mean times that ruins men, Willa."

Willa stared at the palms of her hands. "I never really under-

stood Ben," she said. "He was always thinking things I never knew—wanting things I never knew about. He wasn't a bad man, Icey—he just wanted more than his share, I reckon."

"There hain't a one of them," Icey whispered hoarsely, "that's walked into that Moundsville bank that ain't been tempted to do the same thing Ben done! And don't you forget it! Lordy, there has been times during this depression when I was afraid of what my own Walt would turn his hand to next!"

She sat suddenly, subsided, hugging her fat arms against her bosom and reflecting upon the evil season.

"That boy John," smiled Willa. "He's so much like his Dad it just naturally scares me sometimes. So serious about everything! He's took his Dad's death hard, Icey." She scooped a tiny mountain in the spilled sugar by the bowl and her hand trembled. "He knows something," she said in a low voice. "It scares me, Icey!"

"Knows what, honey?"

"Like there was something still between him—and Ben. Sometimes I think about Ben lying there in that little plot of ground between my Ma and Pa and him being dead and then I look into the boy's face and it's almost as if—as if they had a pact."

"About what?"

"About that money, Icey."

"That money!" snorted the old woman, pouring them both more coffee. "A curse and an abomination before God! I hope Ben throwed it in the river wrapped round a cobblestone."

"But he didn't," said the girl. "I'm right sure of it, Icey. It's hid somewhere. And I think that little John knows where it is."

"What? Great day in the morning! Then why—if he told the boy—why not you—his own wife?"

Willa smiled sheepishly and plucked at a loose thread in the tablecloth.

"He never thought I was fit to know. I begged with him to tell at the prison. I told him it wasn't just for me—it was for them two kids as well. I told him that, Icey."

"And what did he say to that?"

"He said if I got my hands on that money I would just go to hell headlong. He said I was a Bailey and there wasn't ever a Bailey or Harper either one that knowed the worth of a five-cent piece and he said there wasn't a one of them ever got their hands on money that didn't drag himself and all his kin down the fancy road to perdition."

"But what did he figure you to raise them kids on?"

"I asked him that, Icey. He said that money was where it wouldn't ever hurt nobody no more and then he shut up like a clam!"

"But you think the boy knows where it's hid?"

Willa nodded and her eyes filled. "Icey! Honest, I don't want that money! I just wish it was gone somewhere—lost for ever—gone to the bottom of the river! When I think about its still being anywheres around us—it just makes me feel like folks is starin'—wonderin'—sniffin' around for it like dogs. Like somethin' awful was going to happen to me and them kids because of it!"

"Pshaw! Ben was talkin' out of his mind, Willa. The strain of it all! That money is rottin' at the bottom of the river right this very minute. And that's why I say that the sooner you get a man into that house the better, Willa! There's so much can happen to a widowed woman and two youngsters."

A glance at the girl told her that this final remark had frightened her even more. Icey's face lit up and she cracked her palms together sharply.

"Ouija!" she cried. "The board! We'll just ask old Ouija where Ben hid that money."

"No!" Willa's lips were trembling now, the colour of cold ashes.

"All right then. We'll just ask Ouija about that man—the one you're going to meet. Just you set down there, Willa, and mind your manners. You can mock if you will but me and Walt has found out more from Ouija than a body ever gets from them tea leaves and cards."

Willa sat solemnly, with her legs pressed tight together, listening as Icey's slippers shuffled off into the parlour after the board.

She was back in a moment and slapped it on the table and sat down facing it, across from Willa.

Walt came to the doorway to watch and stood puffing thoughtfully on his cob pipe. Icey's face grew solemn and properly awed as she rested the tips of her fingers on the little arrow-shaped pointer. "It takes a spell for Ouija to get workin' right," she explained, opening one eye to glance at Willa. "And don't talk neither. It gets the spirits nervous."

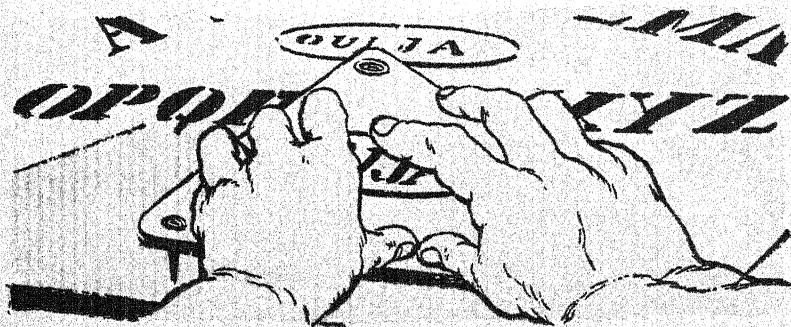
Willa's nerves curled in her flesh as Icey addressed the beyond. "Ouija! Please give us the name of Willa's next husband." Now the room was stone silent but for the thick bubbling of the tea kettle and the faint cold whisper of river wind against the sills.

"Ah! Ah! There!" whispered Icey. "See now!" And the little pointer scratched sharply and jumped beneath her fingers. Willa shut her eyes and pressed the trembling lids with the tips of her fingers. She listened to the dry little feet of the pointer scrabbling slowly across the board, spelling out the letters. Icey's sonorous voice called them as they came.

"C—L—O—T—H! Cloth!" cried Icey. "Now, Walt, whatever do you make of that? Cloth! What kind of sense does that make?"

"Well now, hold on here for just a while," said Walt. "That might signify a lot of things. It might mean Willa was to meet a drummer. A drummer that sold bolts of yard goods."

"Why, sure! Cloth!"



But now Icey pursed her lips and frowned. "Well shoot! A drummer ain't no bargain for a husband!"

Willie smiled and shrugged. "I don't know any drummers," she said softly. "What drummer would want to settle down with me?"

"Just you wait!" laughed Icey. "We'll try again another night. Ouija's mighty good at lookin' ahead, honey."

Now they heard the front door squeak out in the ice-cream parlour and the soft laughter of young voices.

"Gracious! Them's customers!" cried Icey, springing to her feet. "Better go tend them, honey."

Willie hurried off and took the orders while Walt put a record on the Victrola and throughout the next hour they kept busy as other customers came and went. By ten o'clock the town had gone to sleep. Outside the snow drifted past in big flakes and the dark wind had fallen. Willie sat alone by the cash box until Walt came and told her she could go. He and Icey stood watching her move slowly down Peacock Alley towards the river road.

"Poor, poor little thing," mumbled Icey, her handkerchief balled and pressed to her lips. "I wonder what will ever become of her. It's a story sad enough to beat them picture shows."

WHEN the wind tossed the branches of the great oak outside the children's bedroom, the light from the lamp-post at the road's edge made pictures on the wall. John, lying snug in his bed beside the little girl, shut his left eye and squinted through the lashes at these weaving phantoms of shadow and light. There was a black horse prancing. And now as the wind changed there came a three-legged pedlar roistering to the mad wind's song. And now a brave soldier appeared; then a merry clown with toothpick legs.

"John?"

"Yes."

"Is Mom home?"

"Yes."

"Is she in bed, John?"

"Yes. Go to sleep, Pearl."

"All right, John. Good night."

"Good night. Sleep tight, Pearl! Don't let the bed-bugs bite!"

The little girl lay still for a bit, breathing thoughtfully into the matted wig of her doll. "What's bed-bugs, John?"

"Hush up, Pearl! It's time you was asleep!"

She lay still a moment more and then commenced scratching furiously and sat upright in bed.

"Does bed-bugs tickle when they walk, John?"

"Hush, Pearl. Go to sleep. That's just a joke when you say, Don't let the bed-bugs bite. There ain't no such a thing. Now go to sleep!"

"Tell me a story, John," she sighed.

"All right. If you'll lay back down and keep the covers on you so's you won't catch your death of cold."

Pearl shot down under the sheets again and tucked her legs up tight against her breast, hugging the doll and waiting for the story to start.

"Once upon a time—there was a rich king and he had a son and a daughter and they all lived in a castle over in Africa. Well, one day this king got carried away by bad men——"

Pearl loathed the story now. But still she was silent, thankful enough to hear any story at all; comforted by the droning voice muffled beneath the quilt.

"—and before he got carried off he told this son to kill anyone that tried to steal their gold. Well it wasn't long before them same bad men come back to get the gold—you see they missed that on the first trip—and these bad men——"

"The blue men?" whispered Pearl, in a perfect faint of dread.

John stopped telling the story and shut his eyes against the fresh wind-smelling pillow.

"John! What happened to the king's gold? Did the blue men——?"

"Go to sleep, Pearl! I forgot the rest of that story."

He shivered silently under the warm covers, his fingernails digging into his palms. Pearl sighed and put her thumb in her mouth. Presently she took the thumb out again and blinked at the

doll on the pillow beside her. "Good night, Miz Jenny," she said softly. "Don't let the bed-bugs bite."

And she fell asleep. But John lay still awake, heeding on the winter wind the blowing bawl of a steamboat whistle up river. He thought of some of the tales old Uncle Birdie Steptoe used to spin on the deck of his wharf boat on dreaming summer afternoons: of the dark river men—gone now and cursed and lost in the deep water's running. He rose from his pillow when he heard the thick, even breath of his sleeping sister. Slipping from bed he tiptoed across the frosty boards of the floor and fetched his broken cap pistol from the pocket of his jacket. For a moment his own shadow loomed vast and threatening in the golden arena on the wallpaper. The small boy scowled, clenched his chattering teeth and brandished the little gun.

"I ain't scared of you none!" he whispered hoarsely and made a fierce devil's face at the shadow. And he watched in fascination as it mocked him. The shadow hunched down when John hunched down, it twisted when he twisted and it bent grimacing to one side when he did. "Blue man!" hissed John. "Take that!"

And his finger pressed the trigger of the broken toy and in his mind the wonderful roar of powder filled the silence. But the shadow did not fall. When John lifted the pistol above his head and danced on his numb white toes the shadow danced and waved his pistol, too. John clicked the toy pistol once more, a *coup de grâce*, and stumped grimly back to the bed. Beside the body of his sleeping sister John snuggled his face into the cold, lavender-sweet pillow and pressed the toy gun underneath where he could get at it in a moment. And then something in the wind's dark voice caused him to open one eye again to the square of yellow light on the wall. The shadow man: it was smaller than before but it was still there. He pondered it a moment, lying quite still, his heart thundering in his throat. Yes, to be sure it was the shadow of a man in the yellow square of light from the yard lamp: a very silent, motionless man with a narrow-brimmed hat and still, straight arms. John's tongue grew thick as a mitten at the growing dread within him.



"I ain't scared of you," he whispered to the shadow man and the wind rattled the window like pressing hands. The shadow could not really be there. John was not there to make it. And yet there it was: the neatest little shadow man in the world.

John slipped out of bed again and crept to the window. He pressed his nose to the icy pane and stared across the deserted snowy yard. Then he saw the man by the roadside. The man stood in silence, motionless, staring speculatively towards the house like a traveller seeking a night's lodging.

"Go away, man!" whispered John, his flesh gathering for a paroxysm of trembling. "I ain't scared! I ain't scared!" he whispered and saw after a moment that his dread had been unnecessary. It was really a most plain-looking man. He stood shivering for a moment longer in his cheap grey suit and his old grey hat and even as John watched he moved back into the shadows again and off up the road to Cresap's Landing. John crept back into the bed and huddling close to the warm body of Pearl thought

carefully to himself: Just a little grey man in a little grey suit and a little grey hat and he's gone. A pleasant man, too, one would guess. For even now as he wandered up the road he was lifting his high clear tenor to the cold night and singing a sweet old gospel tune.

WILLA said Uncle Birdie Steptoe was a dirty old man and used to forbid John to go there. But to the boy Uncle Birdie's old crumbling wharf boat at the landing seemed the most perfect kind of home. Willa took Pearl to work with her next morning and John had a few hours to spend as he chose. Uncle Birdie was just having morning coffee. When the old man spied John standing timidly on the bricks by the narrow gang-plank he threw up his knotted hands and ran to the door.

"Bless my soul if it hain't Ben Harper's boy, John! Hop up, boy! Come on in and have a good hot cup of coffee with me. Does your Maw let you?"

John's eyes fell.

"By damn, it don't matter if she does or don't! We'll have ourselves a cup anyways. I say a feller ain't worth a hoot without his morning coffee. Hurry up there, boy, and shut that door! It's cold enough to freeze the horns off a muley cow!"

John crept into the narrow little cabin and sat by the stove.

"Now!" cried the old man, fetching the coffee-pot and pouring John's cup full. "How you been? 'Deed, I hain't seen you for a coon's age, Johnny!"

"I been mindin' Pearl," said John.

Birdie cracked his old fist in his leathery palm. "Pshaw now! Hain't it a caution what women will load on to a feller's shoulders when he ain't lookin'! Mindin' girls! Shoot! That hain't no job for a big feller like you!"

"Oh!" said John promptly. "I don't mind, Uncle Birdie. Pearl needs someone to mind her."

"Well now yes, I reckon that's so. I reckon with your Pap gone—that sorty makes you the man of the house, so to speak! 'Scuse me, Cap, while I sweeten up my coffee a little. A man of my years

needs a little snort to get his boiler heated of a mornin'."

John watched as the old man reached under the bursting leather rocker in which he sat and fetching up a pint bottle of crystal liquid, splashed it generously into his coffee.

John wriggled his cold toes and moved closer to the cherry-red wood stove. Beyond the dusty window the river was flaked with shards of spring ice. The early thaw had begun and in a month the cat-tails in the shallows would lift their brown thumbs to test the first spring wind. John wandered to the window and stared at the half-sunken boat down the shore below the landing.

"Ain't nobody stole Dad's skiff," he observed softly.

"Ain't nobody goin' to neither!" cried Uncle Birdie. "Ain't nobody hadn't better try! I figger another three-four weeks the weather'll be fit for me to wade down and git her up on the bank. Then I'll give her a good caulkin' and a new paint job and this summer I'll learn you how to lay as good a trotline as ever your Daddy did, boy."

John came alive at the prospect. He remembered the times when his Dad was home and on summer days that flashed with dragonflies they had gone fishing as far down river as Middle Creek.

"Daggone it anyways, boy!" Uncle Birdie exclaimed, sloshing another helping of liquor into his coffee, "I knowed I had somethin' to tell you and here it clean slipped my mind till just now. That new boarder up at Mamie Ernest's boarding house! He knowed your Dad!"

John grew small and silent, crawling deep within himself, listening with every nerve of his body now.

"Yessir! You see old Mamie's been sweet on me for years now and she gives me breakfast up at the boarding house ever' single mornin' and this very mornin' this stranger was here and we got to talkin' friendly like and he said he knowed Ben Harper. Well sir, I piped right up and——"

"The blue men," said John.

"Which?" said Uncle Birdie. "Why no—he was a preacher and I'll swear to it. Anyways he wanted to know about you two little lambs—meanin' you and little Pearl—and he said he was just

itchin' to do somethin' to help you folks out if there was anything at all you needed. Well now, he was the kindest turned feller a body could ask for."

"Where did he know Dad?"

Birdie's face fell and he fumbled in his trousers for his whittling stick and penknife. "Well, boy, I'll not hide the truth—it was up at Moundsville penitentiary when they had your Dad there. This here feller was chaplain and that's how come he got to know Ben."

John handed the coffee cup back to the old man unfinished.

"I gotta go now, Uncle Birdie!"

"Aw well shucks now, boy! You just got here."

"Well, I told Mom I'd be back for Pearl. She don't like us kids hangin' around Mister Spoon's place too much."

"All right then, Cap. But mind what I promised you now—about the skiff. First nice day we git I'll haul her up and git to work fixin' her up and then you and me'll go fishin'."

John did not turn back as he ran up the narrow board to the landing and hurried against the wind that blew from the hills. As he rounded the corner by Jander's Livery Stable he saw them clearly through the window of Spoon's place and his heart rose thick and cold in his throat. There was the man in the grey suit and the grey hat sitting at the soda fountain smiling and talking with little Pearl kicking her legs over the edge of the marble counter and Willa standing flushed and pleased with her hands folded in her apron while Walt Spoon and Icey stood by with prim, pleased smiles on their faces as they harked to the stranger's words. He was talking to them all and they were just eating it all up like a kitten eats cream and John thought his heart would stop beating altogether because the stranger had Pearl's old doll in his hands now and he was bouncing it up and down on the little girl's knee like it was nothing but the plainest, commonest doll in the world.

Miz ICEY whipped the hot fudge till the black stove trembled. "God works in a mysterious way," she said, "His wonders to perform."

Walt sat by the window puffing contentedly on his pipe. Willa stood in the kitchen doorway, weeping soundlessly into her handkerchief while Pearl, at her knees, buried her face in her mother's apron. John kept apart from them, pale and thin-lipped, his eyes cast to the feet of the stranger.

"And it's a good man," Icey continued, "that would come out of his way to bring a word of cheer to a grieving widow!"

Preacher cleared his throat. "I was with Brother Harper almost to the end," he said in his clear voice. "And I 'lowed as how it would cheer the soul of this poor child to know how brave her husband was—how humble in the face of Eternity and the final judgment. As one of the chaplains at the penitentiary it was, of course, my sad duty to bring comfort to the unhappy man during his final days. And now that I'm no longer employed by the penitentiary it is my joy to bring this small comfort to his widow."

Willa checked her sobs at last and mopped at her swollen eyes.

"You say you ain't with the state no more?" said Walt.

"No, brother, I resigned only yesterday. The heart-rending spectacle of those poor men was too much for me."

The fingers. John could not take his eyes from them. They rested together on the tablecloth in pale, silent embrace like spiders entwined. The fingers with the little blue letters. Now as the fingers stirred John could see them all. He could not read and so he supposed at first that the letters meant nothing; that perhaps each finger had a name and the name was a letter. H-A-T-E. The left hand. L-O-V-E. The right hand. Now Preacher saw the boy staring and the hands sprang apart and he held them up.

"Ah, little lad! You're staring at my fingers!"

John said no word. His eyes fell back to the stubby black tops of Preacher's shoes.

"These letters spell out the Lesson of Life, boy!" boomed Preacher with a cozening geniality. "Shall I tell you the little story of Right-Hand-Left-Hand—the tale of Good and Evil?"

John pressed his lips tighter.

"Ah, he's a shy one, poor little tyke!" cried Preacher. "And no

wonder! Think, my friends, what Life has already done to those tender years."

John would have none of him. But Pearl, who had come and stood by his knee, was wholly won now at the word story. And she pressed her hand against his elbow till he noticed her.

"Come set on Preacher's knee, little darling!" he cried, and tossed her up and cradled her there while Willa's dark eyes watched, as spellbound as the rest.

"Hate!" roared Preacher, thrusting up the fingers of his left hand so that all might read. "It was with this left hand that old brother Cain struck the blow that laid his brother low! And since that ungodly day, brethren, the left hand has borne the curse of the living and Almighty Jehovah!"

"Love!" cried Preacher, thrusting up the right hand now. "See these here fingers, dear friends! These fingers has veins that lead right square to the heart. The right hand, friends! The hand of Love! Now watch and I'll show you the story of Life! The fingers of these hands, dear hearts!—they're always a-tuggin' and a-warrin' one hand against the other!"

Now he thrust his fingers together, left hand and right hand, and now they wrung and twisted one another until the knuckles crackled horribly.

"—a-warrin' and a-ragin', my friends! The soul of man a-fightin' against his own greed and lust and corruption! Look at them, dear hearts! Old left hand Hate's a-fightin' and looks like old right hand Love's a goner! But wait now! Hot dog! Love's a-winnin'! Yessirree! Old left hand Hate's a goner!" And at the last word he brought both hands down with a crash to the table top.

"Hot dog, brothers and sisters! It was Love that won! Old Mister Left Hand has gone down for the count! Now!" cried Preacher, bending to John with a smile. "Did you catch on, boy?"

John sighed.

"I declare, Willa," exclaimed Icey with a hard stare at John. "I never seen that boy of yours so quiet. Looks to me like he could use a good dose of salts."

"John! Take your hands from behind you and act nice."

"Yes, Mom."

Preacher smiled and patted the shaggy head with firm, quick movements. "Many and many's the time," he said softly, "when I sat listening to Brother Harper speak about these youngins."

Now John's eyes flew to Preacher's face. "What did he tell you?"

The room was silent.

"Why, he told me what fine little lambs you and your sister yonder both was!" cried Preacher, his washed-out blue eyes twinkling palely.

"Is that all?" John said. Willa stirred uncomfortably and went over to gather Pearl from the stranger's lap.

"Why no, boy," smiled Preacher, something new in his eyes now as if a game had begun between them. "He told me lots of things."

John lapsed into silence again, his hands pushing into his pockets. "Well," he said, without glancing at Willa. "I reckon me and Pearl better go now!"

"Oh, but the fudge ain't hard yit!" cried Icey, warmly. "I promised you a piece if you was good."

"I don't want no fudge," said John, quite plainly.

"John Harper! When you don't want somethin' you're supposed to say, No, thank you!" cried Willa

"No, thank you!"

"I'm sorry, Icey," Willa murmured, blushing with shame. "I'll tend to him 'gainst I get him home."

But Preacher intervened. "Now, my dear! We all forgot how much these little lambs has endured. He didn't mean no impudence. Did you now, boy?"

The fingers. John could not take his eyes from the fingers long enough to think about what it was Preacher was saying.

"Did you, boy?"

John stood quite still, his feet very close together, thinking about his Dad that day in the tall grass by the smoke-house and he could not hear what they were saying because he was thinking back, trying to remember the hands of the blue men with the guns.

Now Willa's breath stirred in his ear, hot and furious, choking with humiliation.

"You just wait, John Harper! Just wait till I git you home!"

II: *The Hunter*

THIS was towards the end of March. On the Monday of the third week of Preacher's stay at Cresap's Landing he told Walt Spoon that he had made up his mind to stay on through the spring. And since he had no money it was his intention to wait until he could pick up a little work on one of the larger bottom-land farms and pay off his debts and then in May or June he would hold a grand spring revival over in Jason Lindsay's orchard. Few country preachers work full time at it; most of them are farmers or they hire out for the harvest or do store work in the lean times and so to Walt Spoon this seemed a plainly sensible plan. Mamie Ernest, as much taken in by Preacher's grand manner as the rest of them, did not so much as mention the matter of board and room he owed her for and it was tacitly agreed that he would pay for these things when he could. Willa kept on at her job at the confectionery and it was a fairly common thing before long for Preacher to come by of an evening to talk to her about Ben's last days and to enjoy cocoa and a platter of Icky's potsdam cakes. Icky had launched upon an all-out campaign to fan the friendship into marriage. But Willa resisted.

"No, Icky. It's too soon after Ben's passing for me to be thinkin' about marryin' again. Besides—John don't like him much."

"Pshaw! Youngins! It'll be a sad day when a sassy-britches like that John of yours can stand up and tell their elders what's right and wrong. Besides, Pearl just *dotes* on him!"

"Yes. Yes, that's so, Icky. Gracious! Here we are just talkin' about it like he'd gone and *asked* me."

"Shoot now! Ain't no man'll ever ask a woman if she don't find a way to let him know she's ready."

Willa had finished polishing the long silver soda spoons and now she was arranging them neatly in a long row behind the

fountain. She sighed and lifted her troubled eyes to Icey's impatient scowl. "There's something else," she said softly. "It's the money, Icey!" She commenced polishing one of the spoons over again, with swift, nervous rubs of the fragrant cloth.

Icey grunted. "Pshaw! that money! I declare you'll let that money haunt you to your grave, Willa Harper. Such barefaced foolishness! It's gone—gone I tell you!"

"There's no way I can tell," said Willa, staring at her chapped hands, "whether he knows about it or not."

"Who knows?"

"Mr. Powell."

"Well, shoot! I reckon he should know about it! Everyone in Marshall County knew. It was in all the papers. But what in the world has his knowin' about it got to do with anything, will you please tell me that?"

Willa shivered. "Maybe," she whispered, "he knows where it's hid."

"It's at the bottom of the Ohio River! That's where it's hid!"

"Maybe. Maybe not. How would I know, if Preacher was to ask me to marry him, that he wasn't just after the money? Maybe he thinks I've got it hid somewhere."

"Well then, why don't you just come right out plain and ask him if Ben ever said anything to him about it?"

"He'd think it was queer, Icey. I'd be ashamed to have him know I suspicioned him."

"Hark," cried Icey, holding up a finger. "That's him a-comin' up the street now!"

"Yes! Yes!" cried Willa, flushing. "That's him a-singin'! Don't he have the grandest singin' voice? Oh, Icey, I'm a sight!"

"Pshaw! You look grand. Now fill him up with cocoa, Willa! Men can't think good when they're gettin' fed."

Icey ran off to the kitchen so she could listen at the crack. But the old woman's ears did not serve her well in these late years and she knew nothing of what the two had said until ten o'clock struck and Willa returned, flushed and happier-looking than Icey ever remembered seeing her.

"Has he gone?"

"Yes, Icey! Yes!" She flung herself upon the old woman's shoulder, sobbing happily. "Oh, Icey! It's such a load off my mind!"

"Did he ask you to marry him?"

"No! No, it's not that, Icey! It's about the money! I just come right out bold as brass and asked him straight. I just said, Did Ben Harper ever tell you what he done with that money he stole? And Mr. Powell just looked at me funny for a minute with his head on one side and directly he smiled and he says to me: Why, my dear child, don't you know? And I told him I didn't know and I said I'd asked Ben myself during those last days and he wouldn't never tell me."

"Well then, what——?"

"Wait now! I'll get to it, Icey. Then Mr. Powell just looked at me peculiar for a minute and then he finished his cocoa and he smiles and he says: Well now, I'm mighty surprised he wouldn't tell you, my child. And I says: Why whatever do you mean, Mr. Powell? and he says: Because the night before they hanged him he told *me*."

"He told Mr. Powell?"

"Yes! He said Ben sent for him that night and said that the curse of that money had soured on his conscience long enough. He said he wanted to leave this world without leaving that gold behind for other poor, weak mortals to lust after and murder for—and Ben told him that night that the money was gone where it wouldn't never do no one any more harm because of the sinful and greedy wilfulness of poor mortals like himself——"

"Then where is the money?"

"At the bottom of the river," said Willa, gladly. "Wrapped round a twelve-pound cobblestone."

"Ah, Lord! It's a blessing from God, Willa. A blessing from God."

"Yes, Icey! Oh, yes! And I can mind the time when I would have sold my soul to Satan himself to know how I could lay hands on that bloody gold. Oh, Icey, Sin gets such a hold sometimes! There was nights when I'd want to know about that money so

bad I'd even fergit the awful thing that was going to happen to Ben up there at Moundsville penitentiary. That's what Sin and Greed will do to a human soul, Icey."

"Praise God! Yes, Willa! Yes!"

"But Ben took care of me, Icey. Even in death he kept me from the awful sin that money would have brought with it. I feel clean now, Icey. My whole body's just a-quiverin' with cleanness. That money was cursed!"

"It was that! Cursed and bloodied! Praise God!"

They subsided, uttering little crooning cries of emotion, and soon Icey bent forward in her rocker and shook a finger gently under Willa's nose.

"And now!" she cried softly. "You'll know that when Mr. Powell asks you to marry him—that it won't be for *that*. You know well and good that a man of God like him don't give a whipstitch about money or not. It's a cinch he's not stayin' here at Cresap's Landing just for the fun of helping Jason Lindsay with his second ploughing!"

"No," reflected Willa. "I know that. But still—I just can't help wonderin' how little John will take the news about the money."

"Pshaw! Why tell him at all?"

"Yes," said Willa. "Yes, I'm going to tell him. He should know. It's all so strange, Icey." Willa's eyes were bright with the old fear again. "All along," she said, "I had the feeling that John knew something."

JOHN thought: I will go with them because not going would make them think: What does he know? Why is he afraid for us to see him? Is he afraid we'll make him tell?

He thought: Because Mr. Powell knows. He knows I know where the money's hid. He has always known and that's why he told Mom that fib about Dad saying the money was in the river. That's so he can have me all to himself—get it out of me his own way. I am afraid of Mr. Powell. I am more afraid of him than I have ever been of shadows or thunder. I mustn't let them know I am afraid and I must keep on pretending I am brave because I

promised I would be. When the blue men come and took Dad away that day I promised I wouldn't never tell about what he made me swear to. . . . His name is Preacher. His name is Harry Powell. But the names of the fingers are E and V and O and L and E and T and A and H and that story he tells about the one hand being HATE and the other hand being LOVE is a lie because they are both HATE and to watch them moving scares me worse than shadows, worse than the wind. . . .

Willa in a pretty new bonnet from Moundsville was busy by the pump tucking the last of the sandwiches into the picnic basket. Pearl's hair was brushed till the ringlets shone like dark, carved wood against the shoulders of her bright gingham dress. John waited, transfixed with his thoughts, on the back porch.

"John? You ready? Have you got your hair brushed?" Willa came to the screen door and glared at him. "Young man, just kindly wipe that pout off your face 'gainst I give you more of what you got the other night!"

He sighed heavily and turned from the door, staring beyond the picket fence where the hills were peppered now with the first green smoke of spring. It had come overnight: a burgeoning and a stirring in the land that was tired and musty-smelling; now the land was alive and the air was ripe and musky with the spring river smell. He could hear them preparing for the day's outing. It was to be a church picnic down river at Raven Rock at the old Presbyterian graveyard where his father was buried and all the lost, forgotten progenitors before him. They were taking a little chartered packet down river and at nightfall they would return.

Preacher appeared in the hallway. Willa and Pearl ran to greet him and John knew Willa would be holding Pearl and the doll up to kiss and be kissed by Preacher and there was nothing he could do to stop that. He turned and pushed through the screen door and into the kitchen to where they were. His hair was flattened and itching where Willa had wet it down and brushed it slick-flat and his thighs scratched and tingled against the harsh cloth of his good Sunday knickers.

"Ah, there's my boy! There's the little man! Good morning, John."

"Morning." He tried to smile because they might ask him questions if he didn't smile.

"Willa, you were truly left a priceless legacy when Brother Harper passed on!—these fine, fine youngins!"

Willa flushed with pleasure and patted Pearl's curls more neatly against her shoulders. "Yes," Willa said. "I'm right proud, Mr. Powell. Such a comfort they've been to me."

"Well, I reckon we'd best be gettin' down to the boat!" boomed Preacher, and they followed him, the picnic basket in his hand. At the wharf John spied the face of Uncle Birdie and Willa stiffened when the old man waved courteously and she told John he should not speak to that dirty old man. Then John saw Walt Spoon and Icey and a lot of other people on the landing and by the wharf boat the little stern-wheeler lay waiting, its stacks puffing white clouds impatiently into the sky.

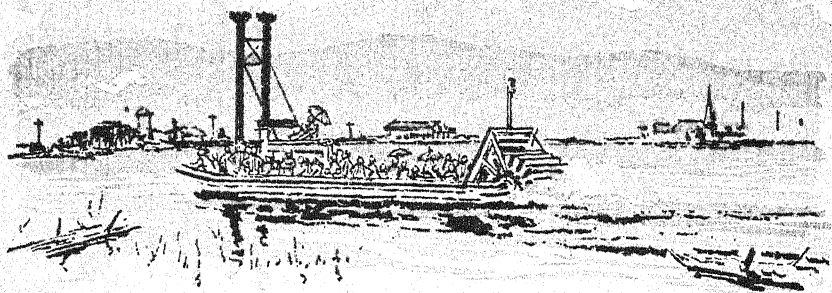
"For evermore! What a pretty day!" sighed Willa, her cheeks pinched pink by the air, her eyes sparkling with happiness.

"Well sure! It's spring—that's why it's so purty," laughed Walt Spoon and led them all up the little plank on to the boat. There was really no cabin. They sat in the shelter of the little boiler deck by the railings where they could look out over the broad expanse of rich, motionless river and the rolling hills of spring beyond the water.

"Here, John. Come and set by me and Pearl and Mr. Powell."

John obeyed, stiff with fright. He squatted beside his mother and listened as Icey Spoon chattered on and he could smell the steam of the boat and the smell of Walt Spoon's pipe and back in the wharf boat Uncle Birdie Steptoe was picking out a silly tune on a rusty banjo.

"Land sakes! We're moving!" cried Icey, and old Friend Martin, the pastor at Cresap's Landing's little Presbyterian church, lifted his enormous palm as if on cue and Nelly Bloyd, the choir leader, raised her sweet soprano voice in the hymn. They were all singing now—the voices of different texture and size mingling



together into a curious and pleasant chord.

"Shall—we—gather at the r-i-v-e-r! Where bright angel feet have tro-od!"

John watched the land move, the boat move, the world moving slowly away from them and he thought: It will be all right because Pearl is sitting on the other side of him and the doll is where he can't see it. Nothing will happen. It will be all right.

"We—will—walk and worship e-e-ver! All the happy, golden d-a-a-y!"

So they sang on for an hour and between hymns Walt Spoon called out the river points and hamlets as they passed them. "That's Sunfish yonder, folks! Over there is Petticoat Ripple!"

Above them the chattering puffing of the steam engine and the occasional shrill scream of the whistle left stuttering echoes among the environing hills and set dogs bawling and howling in the bottom farms along the shore. The air was unbelievably rich and sweet with the temper of the season

"Why are you so still, boy?"

He lifted his eyes at the question, beyond the fingers, beyond the dead grey vest and the stiff paper collar and the black tie. He shrugged swiftly as small boys do and then grinned, the perfect picture of a fool.

"I'd figure a boy like you would be mighty excited—takin' a ride on a real steamboat."

Still he said nothing in reply.

"John, I don't believe you like me very much. I think you made up your mind not to like me from the first."

His gaze met Preacher's eyes steadily now. Was there something quite calm and deadly in those eyes now?—the glitter not of ice but of chilled blue steel?

"Perhaps you better start trying to like me," smiled Preacher, ominously. He paused a moment, letting the words sink in, before he went on. "Because your Mama likes me, John! And your dear little sister Pearl likes me. And if both of them like me and you don't—why, then that makes you different, John. Now, don't you think you might try to like me just a little?"

"Yes . . ."

He thought: Because when you tell a lie it must be to keep from saying a worse thing. Then lying is not a Sin and God will not punish you.

"Ah, that's the boy!" boomed Preacher. "Did you hear that, Willa my girl? He says he likes me!"

Icey intervened, her face flushed and kittenish. "Why, of course he likes Mr. Powell!" she cried. "He's a fine boy! He likes all his elders—don't you, John?"

Now the boat whistle blew three shrill blasts and they moved from the channel towards the grove of trees on the West Virginia shore where shone the white spire of a country church and, among the fences, the pale stones of the burying ground.

"We're here! We're here!" cried Willa with a child's happiness.

They spent the morning solemnly trimming the grass on the little mounds of earth and wrenching winter weeds away from the carved names and the sandstone angels and the little inlaid enamel pictures above the lost and faded dates. They set jelly glasses of wild flowers at the headstones and carried little pails of water from the tap at the edge of the grove. They ate late in the afternoon. John had carried his share of water pails and stood by the unmarked grave of his father while Willa wept and Pearl stood beside her hugging the old doll until the older ones walked away again and then she began the questions.

"John?"

"Yes."

"Where's Dad?"

"I don't know," he said truthfully and Willa intervened then with thick sandwiches for each of them: ham salad between thick slices of bread fresh that morning from Icey's oven. John held his sandwich untouched, still warm and yielding within the wax paper. He returned to his father's grave and stood for a moment perplexed and scowling at the fresh earth.

"Listen here now——" he began clumsily, and then abandoned it because it was just a pile of dirt and he had been foolish enough for a moment to think that it was really *him* there and that maybe he could have made his Dad say that it didn't really matter—that it was all right to tell them after all because it was more than he would be able to endure: holding it all inside.

"John, are you sick?" Willa said. "Eat your sandwich!"

"Not hungry, Mom."

"Well now, I don't want you pestering me going home on the boat this evening. There'll not be a drop of food to eat then."

He unwrapped his big sandwich slowly, regarded it with faint distaste for an instant and then dutifully bit into it.

"Ah, here's my boy!"

His mouth stopped chewing, then began again. He swallowed in dry agony.

"How about a bite out of that sandwich, boy?"

John said nothing, heard nothing but the vast and enormous clanking of the watch in Preacher's pocket: the gold watch of his Dad's that Willa had given him.

"Aw, have a heart, boy," whined the voice, and the hand named LOVE reached out for the sandwich.

John looked at the fingers and the blue letters of false love and thought: Which is more dangerous? Which is worse? When he is joking like this or when his eyes turn blue like the steel of the pistols in the hands of the men by the smoke-house that day. He held the sandwich out.

"Tut tut, boy! I don't want your sandwich. That was just my little joke."

John turned suddenly, threw the sandwich into the rank winter grass and moved off again. After a bit he saw them on a wood bench by the roadside: his mother and Preacher. The others had gone off, flushed and giggling, knowing how it was with lovers, letting them be alone. John looked at his mother's face—flushed and glowing the way it had used to be when Ben Harper came home from work and kissed her in the door. Soon she called to him and stood smoothing her skirts. She had seen the others moving towards the landing with their baskets and garden tools.

"Come along, boy! We're leaving now."

On the boat again he saw that it was nearly dark and there were black clouds over the Ohio hills and the faint grumble of thunder like a dog growling under a porch and he suddenly thought that he had forgotten something; felt suddenly as if there were still a question he should ask the man under the mound.

IN THE Ohio Valley it is the river that gives and takes the seasons. It is as if that mighty stream were the vast, alluvial artery of the land itself so that when the towns grow weary of snows and harsh fogs the great heart pumps green spring blood down the valley and the banks are warmed and nourished by it. And so now it was the prime of spring in the bottom lands. Soon the hounds would bay in the creek hollows on nights when the moon was a curl of golden hair against the shoulder of the Ohio hills. Soon the shanty-boat people would join their fiddle and mouth-harp racket to the chorus of green frogs down under the mists in the moonlit willows. And that morning the showboat *Humpty Dumpty* had put in at the landing.

And if, in this urgent season of mating, Willa found the attentions of Preacher attractive and exciting, to Icey Spoon they were a challenging imperative. She was roused to a perfect fury of determination to make a match between these two. It seemed to the old woman that to instrument such a union would vindicate something lost in the dust of her own old, youthful, half-forgotten yearnings. Preacher was a man of God. Any woman should be

proud to marry a man of God. And so she persisted night and day, pressing Willa upon this prince of men.

"It'll not be for ever, my fine missy, that a man like that will wait around for a widow to make up her mind. You're not the only fish in the river, my proud girl!"

"Oh I know, Icey. I just don't know what to say."

"Say yes. That's all! How many times is it he's asked you now?"

"Twice."

"For evermore! I swear Willa if you ain't a caution!"

"If I was only sure it would—turn out, Icey——"

"A husband," grunted Icey, "is one piece of store goods you never know till you take it home and get the paper off. But if ever I seen a sure bargain it's Mr. Powell! A good, Christian gentleman!"

"Yes, Icey, but that boy of mine—I don't think he believes that about the money—that Ben throwed it in the river."

"Nonsense! Mr. Powell wouldn't have lied. He's a man of God, Willa. Did you explain to the boy——?"

"Yes. I told John yesterday. And then I made him come in the parlour while Mr. Powell—while Harry told him."

"And what did he say to that?"

"Nothing. I don't think John believed him," Willa said.

"Well, honey, don't *you*? That's the important thing after all."

"Yes, I suppose I never doubt really—what Harry says is true."

She pushed a lock of hair back with her hand and turned her anguished eyes to the old woman. "Icey, what shall I do?"

"Marry him!"

"But I don't feel—Icey, it ain't like Ben and me that summer——"

"Fiddlesticks! When you're married forty years you'll know that all that don't matter a hill of beans. I been married that long to my Walt now and——"

"There's another thing," sighed Willa. "I kept them kids out of school all last winter till the trouble was over. I just couldn't bear what they had to put up with from them other kids—mean, nasty songs and horrible pictures on the fences. Next winter, if I married

Mr. Powell—I'd send them both back to school. They'd seem more respectable somehow——"

"Pssst! Yonder he comes! Mr. Powell on his way here!"

"Yes. Oh yes! Do I look all right, Icey?"

"Honey, you're as pretty as a picture."

"That's good, Icey!" she breathed wildly. "Because——"

"Did you—have you decided! Will you——?"

"Yes! Oh yes, Icey! If he asks me again tonight I'll say yes!"

Icey scampered off to the kitchen, purple with excitement, and presently Willa and Preacher were alone at a table by the window.

"Cocoa tonight?" she smiled.

"No, my child! I haven't eaten a scrap of food all day."

"Goodness! Are you sick?"

"Yes—no——!"

He rested his elbows on the table and fixed her with his burning eyes.

"Willa, I can't sleep nights till you say yes," he murmured, reaching for her hand. "It's just as if the Lord kept whisperin' in my ear—— This is the woman for you, Harry Powell!"

He paused for an instant. "Have you thought about it, Willa?"

"Yes," she breathed, scarlet with her emotions. "I have!"

"And have you an answer for me?"

"Harry, I'll marry you," she stammered. "If only——"

"If only what, my dear?"

She sought to form the answer, but it was too vague, too lost. She did not know herself whose voice this was, deep in the vast river murmurs of her mind, that kept telling her not to do this thing.

OLD Uncle Birdie took his quid of tobacco out of his mouth long enough to gulp down another choking throatful of the corn liquor in the tin cup. John squatted on the threshold of the wharf-boat cabin watching him with a faint, admiring smile. The night air was shrill with the enormous racket of the showboat calliope a few feet above them.

"I can't hear ye, boy!"

"I said, Did you fix Dad's skiff yet?"

"The skiff! Daggonne it, Johnny, I've had such a misery in my hip these past couple of days I've barely stirred from the boat. Next week now. I promise. We'll go fishin' first day of June if it ain't too sunny."

John sighed. He ducked his head outside the door and stared again in consuming wonder at the blazing glory of the showboat. Half the county had come to Cresap's Landing that night to see her and pay their money and go on board to view the show. John, of course, had no money and so he had contented himself with the prospect of a half hour's chat with Uncle Birdie and these stolen glances at the wonderful boat here within staggering earshot of her piping calliope. He had disobeyed Willa again—coming here. And he had, with much greater misgivings, left Pearl in bed alone. And it was this latter which itched his conscience until inevitably it got the better of him and so at last he rose and lifted his hand in farewell to the old man.

"Leavin', boy?"

"Yep! Gotta watch out for Pearl, Uncle Birdie."

"Well good night, boy. Come again—any time. And mind now—I'll have your Paw's skiff in shipshape inside of a week."

He skipped up the plank and on to the bricks of the landing, already slick with evening mists. He was wild with misgivings now about having left Pearl alone in the house. She was his trust, his pledge to Ben. As he hurried for the river road the voice of the calliope fell to a thin faint chatter high in the spring night. Passing Spoons' he spied his mother and Icey at the fountain, and Icey was fairly dancing a jig and hugging Willa and kissing her cheek, and he moved on past, wondering what they were up to now. He hurried more, knowing that it was past ten, and he did not want his mother to overtake him on her way home from work. The house loomed silent in the faint shine of the young spring moon, and he saw that the lamp in the parlour window was lit. He could not remember whether it had been lit when he left and

that made him frightened because he was sure Willa would not have left it burning.

"Is somebody there?" he said to the house, as he tiptoed up the steps. "Is anybody there?"

But there was no reply, no sound, and he opened the screen door and closed it softly and stepped into the shadowed hallway. He knew almost at once that Preacher was there or had been there not an instant before because there was a Preacher smell in the silent air and it was the smell of dread in his nose, and doglike his flesh gathered and bunched at the scent of it.

"Is anybody here?"

"Good evening, John!"

So he had been standing there all along by the hall rack where Ben Harper used to hang his cap. Preacher: standing there all along, letting him be scared, letting him call three times before he answered. Now Preacher moved forward and the light from the open doorway to the parlour threw a gold bar of light across the livid line of lip and cheek and bone beneath and one eye shone like a dark, wet grape and the lid crinkled over it nervously.

"Does your mother know you go wandering alone at night, John?"

"No. She said——" But there was no way to explain, no excuse, no escape. And then he felt the anger rise choking in his throat and he thought: What right has he got?

"Your little sister Pearl is asleep then?"

"Yes."

"Good, John."

Now he was in his genial, cajoling mood and John knew suddenly that he liked this mood less than the dangerous mood, because you never knew what was going on behind the coaxing, squinting eyes and the thin smile.

"I have something to talk to you about, John."

"Well," he sighed. "I reckon I ought to be gettin' up to bed if you don't mind——"

"Really, my lad! You weren't worryin' about bed when you

sneaked off to the wharf to waste your time with that evil old man."

And this had him dead to rights and so he sat down on a straight-backed chair by the door and wished for the sound of Willa's footfall on the tanbark outside because he was getting scared again. Then he heard the scrape of another chair as Preacher sat opposite him and laid a cold finger on his hand.

"I had a little talk with your mother tonight, John."

John thought: Why don't he take me in the parlour to talk where there is light instead of out here in the dark hallway where I can't watch his face while he says it and know whether what he is saying is real or not.

"We talked it over, John—and your mother decided it might be best for me to—let you know the news."

"What news? What——?"

"Your mother told me tonight she wanted me to be a daddy to you and your sister. We're going to get married, boy!"

He thought: I am asleep and I am having a bad dream because I rolled over on Pearl's doll and it hurts my stomach and when I wake up I will see the light on the wall where the tree branch dances and then I will turn over and it won't hurt any more.

"Married!" Preacher's voice went on, triumphantly. "We have decided to go to Sisterville tomorrow and have a very simple wedding and when we come back——"

"You ain't my Dad!" breathed John. "You won't never be my Dad!"

He was not scared any more; his anger swung and blazed in the dark room like a pine torch.

"—and when we come back," shrilled Preacher, "we will all live here together in this house—and be friends—and *share our fortunes together, John!*"

Afterwards, John could not believe he could ever have said so foolish a thing as he said next. At night, remembering it weeks later, he would sweat and clench his hands till the soft nails bit into the palms and the lips in his tossing face would deny it to the dark. But it was true—he had said it.

"You think you can make me tell!" he had screamed, till the house was shrill with it. "But I won't! I won't! I won't!"

And then he hunched and gawked at his own folly. And the fingers of his left hand cupped over his gaping mouth, and his heart cried out like a little dry voice of dread: Oh, I shouldn't never have said that! Now he will guess! Now he will know! Oh God, please don't let him know!

"Tell me *what*, boy?" said Preacher softly, and though the face had moved out of the bar of light again John knew the head was cocked and the mouth smiling.

"Nothin'!"

"Are we keeping secrets from one another, little lad?"

"No. No."

Now the vast, dark figure straightened and relaxed, chuckling softly. "No matter, boy! We've a long time together."

He held out the hand called Love but John did not move.

"Will you shake my hand, boy? Will you wish me happiness with your mother?"

John whirled then and raced helter-skelter up the creaking stairway to the bed where he had belonged all along and he knew God had done all this thing to him to punish him for being bad and leaving Pearl alone.

He crouched in the darkness beneath the quilt and embraced the warm body of the sleeping Pearl while his hand sought for the doll's face and his finger traced the shape of one staring plaster eye over and over again in senseless terror.

"TONIGHT," chuckled Ikey, patting John's head, "you and your sister are going to sleep here with me and Mister Spoon."

"Where's Mom, John?" said Pearl.

Ikey caught the little girl up and plumped her into the ample lap and patted a chubby knee. "Your Ma has went to Sisterville," she said. "With Mr. Powell!"

"Why?"

"To git married is why! Ain't that nice, honey? Just think! 'Gainst she gits back tomorrow you'll have a brand-new dad."



"Is Dad comin' home?"

John wandered away from them, stood staring out through the sparkling window of the ice-cream parlour. He did not like Icey or Walt. They were part of it; they had helped fashion the nightmare. At supper-time he took his place wordlessly at the alien board and ate glumly, answering when spoken to, eyes downcast. Icey held her peace till after the Italian cream was finished and then she began.

"John, you've got no cause to act up this way about your mother's marryin' Mr. Powell."

He freed the napkin slowly from his collar.

"I declare! I'd think a boy like you would be proud gettin' a fine stepfather like Mr. Powell."

She fixed him with her unwavering scrutiny, searching for some effects of these remarks.

He kept his eyes lowered, waiting till she was done, knowing it was part of his lot to endure this, too. Icey grunted impatiently and snatched up a pile of plates, bound for the sink. "I've put fresh sheets and a fresh bolster case on for you!" she cried. "You'll find it just as comfy as your own bed."

John waited for Pearl to precede him into the bedroom.

"Here, honey," said Icey, marching to Pearl with outstretched arms. "I'll take your doll so's you won't roll on it."

John's mouth flew open but it was Pearl who spoke.

"Oh no! Miz Jenny always sleeps in the bed with me."

"Nonsense! You'll roll on her in your sleep and hurt yourself, honey. Now I'll keep good care of the doll for you till morning——"

"No," said John in a far-away voice that did not seem to come from him at all. "Pearl always sleeps with her doll, Miz Spoon ma'am." He crawled between the cold sheets, his lips the colour of death, trembling even after Icey had agreed to let Pearl keep the doll and bent to kiss the little girl's cheek.

"Sleep tight," she whispered and closed the door and John lay listening as the old couple moved about in the kitchen talking in low voices and drinking coffee and moving out from time to time

to serve the few customers that came in after the show. Pearl stirred, then turned to face him.

"John? Where's Mom gone?"

"To git married."

"To Mr. Powell?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad, John. I love Mr. Powell!"

"You little fool!" he whispered but so that she did not really hear, making the words to himself with his lips and clenching his fists.

"I love him lots and lots, John!"

And John thought: She is with him now—Mom is—and she is on his side and now Pearl is on his side, too, and that makes me alone.

Now Pearl was sitting upright in bed and the doll was sitting up, too, its painted eyes staring into the moon.

"John, if Mr. Powell is Mom's husband then I can tell him about——?"

His hand with the swiftness of a copperhead flew up and was pressing into her wet, surprised mouth and beneath his strong clasp she struggled, whimpering, and began to squeal softly into his fingers. In a moment he took the hand away, yet held it poised, ready to clamp down again.

"You swore, Pearl! You swore that day, Pearl! You promised Dad you wouldn't tell!"

"Oh, I wouldn't never tell, John! You know I wouldn't tell!"

He glared into her face, chalk-white and gasping.

"If ever you do," he whispered furiously, "I'll get a big, big giant to come and *murder* you! Yes! Yes! A big giant with a long shiny sticker knife like *he's* got!"

"I promise, John! Oh, John, I swear!"

"All right! Just so you remember. Do you *swear*?"

"Yes! Yes!"

"Because," John went on, his eyes in the moon now, "he'll ask you someday soon. He'll come and beg you to tell him."

"But I won't tell him, John! I won't tell *ever*! Not even Mr.

Powell!" She lay back down, breathing heavily with her thoughts.

John lay thinking, too. Last Wednesday when Preacher was out in the garden helping Walt Spoon spread bone meal he hung his coat on the doorknob and I poked around in the pocket when he wasn't looking and there it was only I didn't know what until I pressed that little silver button and it jumped out and shook my hand. I tried to get it closed but it wouldn't work and so I just stuck it back in his coat, open, and run home and I guess he never suspicioned it was me because he never said nothing.

THEY had taken a pleasant little room at the Brass House and it was her honeymoon and she kept thinking as she watched him lay Ben's old watch carefully on the dusty dresser: He is my husband and I love him. He is not Ben but I will learn to love him even more because he is a man of God. In a moment she would go down the hallway to the bathroom by the fire escape and put on her nice muslin nightgown and come back to him. It could not ever be the way it had been with Ben: it could not ever be like the nights of that enchanted summer of love. But she would make her mind forget that and she would make it something else—something better—between herself and Harry Powell.

"Willa, are you going to get ready for bed?"

"Yes," she said. "I was just looking at you, Harry—thinking how handsome and good you are."

"Hurry along, my dear! We both need our rest."

"Yes! Yes, of course, Harry!"

She lifted his coat to hang it up for him and something thick and heavy in the pocket struck against the door. He did not notice when she took the thing out, stared at it curiously for a moment, with a softening of her smile, and then put it quickly back. She fetched her wash-cloth and soap and towel and hair-brush and went off to the bathroom with that smile still on her lips but twisted with faint puzzlement now. It is a kind of razor, she kept thinking, and she listened to the song on a radio that was blaring somewhere down the street. A woman laughed in another room and a glass tinkled and a man began singing a coarse parody

of the radio tune and the woman laughed louder.

He was in bed asleep when she returned. The lights were out. The ragged window blind flapped like the grey wing of a hurt bird beside the bed and she stared back at her pale sister in the mirror as she stood waiting and wondering if he would call to her.

"Harry?" she called softly, after a moment.

He was snoring lightly. And the window blind flapped.

"Fix that window," he said suddenly in a clear, wide-awake voice.

She rolled the blind all the way up, thinking: He was pretending to be asleep, he was pretending to snore. That is because he is embarrassed. She slipped between the sheets, fresh and sweet from some country widow's wash line, and lay for a moment listening to the radio down in the town and her own heart thundering and then she turned on her side and stared at the back of his head. She could hear his lips moving in the darkness with a small rapid sound like the feet of mice.

"Harry?" she breathed.

He stirred impatiently.

"I was praying," he said.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Harry! I didn't know! I thought maybe——"

He turned suddenly and although she could not see his face on the pillow she could feel the anger in it.

"You thought, Willa, that the minute you walked in that door I'd start in to pawing you in the abominable way men are supposed to do on their wedding nights! Eh? Ain't that right now?"

"No, Harry! I thought——"

"That's the kind of thing they make jokes about in those filthy burlesque houses down river at Louisville and Cincinnati! Oh yes, I've witnessed them with my own eyes! I made myself go, Willa, just so's I could witness with my own eyes the degradation to which mortal men and women can fall!"

Her eyes widened in the pitch darkness of his looming face until they burned and her mouth grew dry as his words lashed her.

"I think it's time we got one thing perfectly clear, Willa! Are you listening?"

"Yes," she moaned.

"Marriage to me represents a blending of two spirits in the sight of Almighty God! I reckon it's time I made that clear, Willa!"

She shut her eyes, hating herself for the shame and hurt she felt now and she prayed that he would stop but somehow she knew that he had just begun; somehow he seemed to have roused himself to sermon pitch. Suddenly he got out of the bed and stood in the yellow neon reflection which the window cast into the room, his thin, wiry arms moving stiffly in the sleeves of his nightshirt.

He pulled the window blind clear to the sill, then snapped the light on. It flooded the room with its uncharitable yellow glare.

"You have the body of a woman!" he cried. "The temple of creation and motherhood! Yours is the flesh of Eve that man since Adam has profaned—has made into a vessel for his own corruption and lust!"

He was pacing now, thin and mad and touchingly absurd in his white nightshirt.

"Mind you, my girl, I'm not pointing you out as worse than the rest. But that body!—*that* body!——"

He pointed to her, trembling in the bed.

"—that body was meant for begetting children! It was not meant for the lust of sinful men! That's filthiness! I say that's filthiness and the Devil's business, my girl! Do you understand that?"

"Yes! Yes!"

"Do you want more children, Willa?"

"I—— No. I——"

"No! Of course you don't! It is the business of our marriage to mind those two you have now—not to beget more! And if not to beget more—then why should we soil our bodies with rottenness? Ain't that talkin' sense, my girl? Ain't that the way the Lord wants it?"

"Yes."

He stood staring at her a moment longer, his head cocked to one side, his face twitching a little. Then he turned off the light and let the window blind up again.

"I'm sorry." She shaped the words soundlessly with her lips,

and watched him at last crawl stiffly under the sheets again and turn his back to her again and then listened to the dry, faint breath of his swift, whispered prayer running on as endlessly as a reel of film on a projector.

She lay on her back staring at a dark stain on the ceiling and thought to herself: He is right. It is rottenness, all of it, and I must get cleaned and purified of those thoughts so I can be what Harry wants me to be. He is right: I mustn't never want that again because it is what he says: a Sin and an abomination.

And just before she fell asleep she heard another sound and thought: Well, I must be wrong. He wouldn't be doing that!

But it was so. He was crying softly in his sleep like a child and all she could do was lie there in an agony of fear, not able to touch him in any way, not able to do anything at all but soundlessly shape the words against the wrath of God's anger and God's mercy there in the dark room of the little country hotel: Good night, Harry! Good night!

THE GOLDEN JUNE morning quivered like water in the new leaves of the grape arbour. Pearl squatted with the doll Jenny and the doll was Willa now and the tomato stake with the rag wrapped round it: that was Mr. Powell. Pearl stood them side by side against the bricks at the bottom of the arbour and sang a song because Willa and Mr. Powell were married and they had returned from their honeymoon. Now the scissors from the pantry flashed in her fingers as she cut out the green paper faces. These were the two children and she was a patient mother because, when the wind blew, those mischievous children would try to run away.

"Now, Willa! You must make me my supper for I am very hungry."

"Yes, Mister Powell! Right away, Mister Powell! And what about our two green children—Pearl and John?"

"Well, you can make Pearl some supper, Willa, but John is bad. Put John to bed without his supper."

Pearl tucked the jagged bits of paper tight between the bricks at the feet of the doll named Willa and the stick named Mr.

Powell. In the kitchen she could hear her mother rattling pots and plates for supper-time.

Suddenly the errant wind swept fitfully through the vines. John and Pearl fluttered away from the child's helpless fingers; sailed and drifted high over the buttercups, into the sky.

"Come back, you bad children!" wailed Pearl. "Come back!"

But they were lost beyond recall, borne on the winds above the meadow.

"WE SHALL bow our heads in grace."

John waited till Pearl's eyes were closed and then he lowered his shaggy head over his plate of ham and hominy and shut his eyes. Preacher's grace rolled on and on, but at last his voice rose to conclusion.

"—Though we live under the curse of Cain, Almighty God, we turn our backs against the temptations of this mortal flesh. Bless this good food, Oh Lordamighty, and let it build up our stren'th to fight the Devil's fiendish persuasions and the temptations of gold and lust amen pass the bread please, boy."

Willa kept her eyes on her plate throughout most of the meal. She ate very little. Perhaps more than any of them, John saw the change that had come over her since Preacher had entered the family. Her eyes bore dark shadows and her mouth was thinner—paler—and her flesh itself seemed to have capitulated to the urgent moral protocols of her marriage until the very roundness of her sweet figure had turned epicene and sour. Something new had come into her life. Willa had discovered Sin. She talked about Sin constantly to John and although Pearl understood only that Sin was being bad she was pleased to sit and hear Willa out when the sermonizing mood was upon her. Preacher had had a series of spring revival meetings in a tent down the river at Welcome which had brought them enough money to live on through the summer. These meetings had been high-lighted by Willa's own impassioned testimony and her shrill, fevered voice had risen above the cries of the most penitent sinners in the valley.

"You have all suffered!" she cried out one night, her eyes burning in the torchlight. "And you have all sinned! But which one of you can say as I can say: I drove a good man to murder and robbery because I kept a-hounding him and a-pestering him night and day for pretty clothes and per-fumes and face paint. And finally he couldn't stand it no more and he went out and took a gun and *slew*!—yes, slew two human beings and stole their money and come home to give it to me. That's where the Lord stepped in!"

"Yes!" cried Preacher, rolling his head gently till the paper collar bit into his neck. "Ye-e-es!"

"Yes!" panted Willa, her voice rising to a scream. "The Lord come down out of the sky and stood by the smoke-house that day and told that man that the money would just drive his poor weak wife to hell headlong!—HEADLONG!"

"Yes! Yes!" panted the sinners under the tent.

"—and them two kids would git dragged along to hell, too! HEADLONG! Yes! Yes!—and the Lord told that poor bloody-handed man to take that rotten money and throw it in the river yonder, brother! Wrap it 'round a stone and throw it in the old Ohio River and let it get washed clean down into the Mississippi!—and let it wash out into the ocean where the fish can look at it! Because a fish has got more sense sometimes than a man!"

(Laughter.) "Yes! Oh yes, Sister Powell! Praise God!"

"—and then the Lord told that man to give himself into the hands of the Law and let Justice be done—and after Justice had been done to Ben Harper the Lord led Brother Powell to me and said, SALVATION COMETH!"

"Amen! Amen!"

"AND THE LORD BENT DOWN AND SAID TO ME: MARRY THIS MAN AND GO FORTH WITH HIM AND PREACH THE WORD!"

"AMEN! AMEN!"

And then someone began to lead them in singing "When the Mists Have Rolled Away" and they sang for nearly half an hour until the whole bottom lands echoed with their voices. That night Preacher counted out the collection and told Willa it had been

one of their best. It was close to thirty-five dollars, two bushels of Winesaps, and a half-gallon jug of maple syrup.

SOMEWHERE—somehow—Preacher always managed to find John alone in the house after supper. Now he stood beside him at the cellar door and because Preacher was standing in the way it was impossible to walk down the hallway to the stairs and go up to bed. Willa had gone to Cresap's Landing after supper to visit Ikey and Walt. Pearl was still playing with her doll family under the grape arbour.

"Because," Preacher was saying, and his manner had long since stopped being wheedling and pleasant. "Because sooner or later I will find out where it's hid, boy. It's just a matter of time."

"I don't know! I don't know nothing about it!"

"I could thrash you for contradicting me, boy. That's back talk."

John thought: I would rather have the thrashing than the questions because the thrashing hurts quick and then it's over but the questions keep on for ever and ever amen.

"Well, boy? Where is it hid, boy?"

John thought: Even she is changed now—my mother. If I go to her and tell her that he asks me the questions all the time she says I am lying, that I am making it up because I hate him and because I am sick with Sin and because I am trying to turn her against him.

Preacher read his thoughts. "Your mother says you tattled on me, boy. She says you told her that I asked you where the money was hid. That wasn't very nice of you, John. Have a heart, boy."

"It don't matter," the boy murmured.

"No. That's right. It don't matter. Because it's your word against mine. And it's *me* she believes!"

Yes, he thought. Because you have made her be crazy.

"She thinks that money's in the river," smiled Preacher. "But you and me—we know better! Don't we, boy?"

John pressed his lips tight, listening to the far-off chant of Pearl, making her little home under the grape arbour.

"Don't we, boy! Damn you! Answer me! Answer, you little beast!"

"I don't know nothin'," he said dully and thought: After he shouts at me he goes away. He takes the knife out of his pocket like he is doing now and he presses the button and the sharp thing flicks out and he looks at me for a minute and then he starts paring the big, blue thumbnail and then he goes away.

"No matter," Preacher said in an even voice and the knife dropped back in his pocket. "Sooner or later, boy, you'll tell. The summer is young yet, little lad. Now go and fetch your sister and put her to bed!"

John ran to the kitchen and strained his eyes into the golden river dusk.

"Pearl?"

He could hear her voice, intimate and whispering as she scolded the doll named Willa and the stick named Mr. Powell.

"What, John?"

"Bedtime!" He moved down across the grass, already wet with evening dew, towards the shape of Pearl's light pinafore at the end of the harbour. "Come on now, Pearl!"

He could see her face turned up to him now, moon-round and pallid with the big eyes like dark pansies above the tiny mouth.

"You'll get mad, John," she whimpered.

"I ain't mad, Pearl. Only git on up to bed. It's——"

"You'll get awful mad, John. I done a Sin."

He could hear her frantic movements at some task on the damp bricks at his feet; he could hear the crisp rustle of paper in her frightened hands.

"Pearl! You ain't——"

"John, don't be mad! Don't be mad! I was just playing with it! I didn't *tell* no one!"

His legs turned to water at the thought; the flesh of his neck gathered in quick, choking horror. "It's all here," she whispered placatingly and the furious movements continued.

Now the white moon of early summer appeared suddenly from the hill beyond the meadow and a vast aura of pale, clear light

illuminated the sight before the boy's eyes: the bricks beneath his feet littered with the green fortune in hundred-dollar bank notes that the little girl was frantically gathering together again.

"Pearl! Oh, Pearl!"

Now she was stuffing them back where they had been all along; pushing them through the rent in the cloth body of the doll Jenny that was held closed with a safety pin beneath the shabby toy dress. John fell to his knees and sank his hands into the pile of certificates that had slipped through Pearl's frightened hands. And then the soft footfall in the wet grass at the other end of the grape arbour told him that the hunter had returned.

"John? What are you doing, boy?"

"Getting Pearl to bed. I——"

"What's taking you so long about it? What's that you're playing with, boy?"

"Pearl's junk," he said magnificently. "Mom gits mad when she plays out here and don't clean up afterwards."

And then he stuffed the last of the bills into the soft cotton body and fumbled the safety pin back into the tear again. Preacher had not stirred. But John could sense that he was alert, suspicious, sniffing.

Now he arose and held out the doll to Pearl and then turned, facing the long, the interminable distance to the end of the green arbour where the dark hunter waited. He began to lead Pearl, to walk slowly and ever so cautiously towards the dark man against the blue smoke of the moonlight. He could see the gleam now of Preacher's watch chain against the death-grey vest and thought: He ain't guessed yet. He don't know.

He walked carefully, slowly, putting one foot before the other cautiously and holding Pearl's hand and thinking with growing nausea: But he heard me talk about cleaning up. Won't he think: Cleaning up what? Where's the paper I heard rustling? Where are the paper dolls?

And now he stood directly before him, the watch chain gleamed like fire before his eyes and he did not breathe, did not move.

"Now," said Preacher, "up to bed with the both of you!"

The boy fought back the flood of hysterical laughter that struggled and welled in his throat. He choked it back and led Pearl up the porch steps and into the kitchen.

Within half an hour Willa returned home from the Spoons' and John listened to her voice and the voice of Preacher below the bedroom in the kitchen and presently her footsteps creaked on the back stairs and the door opened a crack.

"John?"

"Yes, Mom," he whispered.

"Were you impudent to Mister Powell again tonight, John?"

"Mom, I—I didn't mean——"

"What were you impudent about?"

"He asked me about the money again, Mom!"

"You know that's not so, John! You always make up that lie. There's no money, John. Can't you get that through your head?"

"Yes'm. I told him——"

"You think you can turn me against him, don't you, John?" she whispered. "You sinned, boy. Ask God to forgive you for making up that lie about Mister Powell."

"Forgive me," he said. "God."

She closed the door then and the tired footsteps stole away down the back stairs to the kitchen again and presently Pearl spoke, dreadfully worried.

"John, I done another Sin tonight. I cut up two of them—only *two*, John. I cut them out with the scissors—the faces——"

"I forgive you," he said. "But don't never do that again, Pearl. And don't never take them out again. You hear me, Pearl?"

"Yes. Yes, John. I swear!" And she fell asleep, face to the summer moon, dreaming. "Come back! Come back, you naughty children!" she cried in the dark nest of sleep. But the paper children spun away into the summer wind: beyond recall, beyond heeding, whirling and dancing over the buttercups, into the sun.

It is a night for dreams. John sleeps and once again he is play-

ing in the grass beside the smoke-house with Pearl in that late afternoon of Indian summer.

"There comes Dad yonder!" he cried, jumping to his feet, and Pearl stood up, too, with the doll named Miz Jenny in her arms.

Ben Harper's Model T rounded the bend in the lane. The old car bounced and rattled up the ruts into the yard below the grape arbour and Ben fell through the door and came staggering up towards the house.

John ran down the yard towards him, thinking: I'll bet he has brought me and Pearl a present because he is acting funny and when he plays jokes on me like this there is always a little bag in his coat pocket with a cap pistol or a toy lead streetcar or something in it. He could hear Pearl stumbling along behind him on her short legs, wailing for him to wait and then he was looking up at his father, seeing the eyes, seeing the torn shirt sleeve, the dark, spreading stain.

"Dad, what's wrong? You're bleeding, Dad."

"Ain't nothin'. Now listen to me, boy—there ain't much time! John, listen!"

And then the boy saw the gun in Ben's left hand and the thick roll of bank notes in the other. Then he began to scream; the world was gone mad. And Ben Harper stuck the pistol in his heavy motor-cycle belt with the big glass studs and slapped the boy smartly across the face.

"Listen to me, John. *Listen!*"

Pearl put her finger in her wet mouth and watched gravely.

"I done something in Moundsville," Ben whispered, wincing and swaying a little. "They're comin' to take me, boy. This money here—I stole it, John. Yes. I stole all this money."

"Dad——"

"Hush, boy! They mustn't get it. None of them! Not even Willa. Do you understand me, boy? Not even your Mom!"

"Dad, you're bleeding!" he wailed.

"Hush, John! Just listen—we've got to hide it. Now think, boy. Where? There's close to ten thousand dollars here, boy. And it's yours. Yours and little Pearl's. Think, boy! Think! Where?"

Behind a stone in the smoke-house. Yes. That's it. Ah! No! Under a brick under the grape arbour. No! They'd dig for it."

Pearl knew it was all a game her Dad and John were playing and she sat down suddenly in the daisies and threw Miss Jenny high above her head, falling back into the ironweed and Queen Anne's lace, kicking her legs at the sun.

"I just can't clear my head!" Ben was crying, shaking his shoulders like a wounded dog. "What's happened? Dear God, what was I thinking? Because she ain't strong enough for it—in her hands it would be just like a gun—she'd drag them all to hell headlong. No! I remember now! It's for *them*! Yes, that's why I done it. Sure, that's it. Them kids! That Pearl and John! That's the way it was!"

Now Ben's mad eyes opened and squinted and opened wide again and focused on the doll in Pearl's arms and he smiled as if under the impact of a fresh and wonderful revelation.

"Why, sure! Sure! In the doll! Sure! That's where!"

There was a torn place in the doll's cloth back and it had a safety pin keeping it closed and now Ben fell to his knees and lifted the doll from Pearl's hands.

"No! No! Miz Jenny!"

"Wait! Wait now, honey! I won't hurt her none. Pearl, baby! Wait now!"

But Pearl wailed in anguish when Ben plucked the safety pin loose and the rent place fell open and he reached in and tore out a great wad of cotton stuffing from the doll body and then stuffed the thick roll of green bills inside. And then the pin was back and the cheap little dress had fallen and the doll was back in Pearl's hands and she was snuffling angrily and glaring at her father.

"You hurt her!"

"Ah, no! She ain't hurt, baby. That little spot of blood on her dress. That ain't doll's blood, Pearl honey. It's mine! No, she's all right!" And he struggled to his feet again, swaying and passing the back of his hand over his sick eyes. "Listen, John! Listen to me now! You must swear, boy! *Swear*, boy!"

"What? I——"

"Swear means promise, John. You must promise that you will take good care of Pearl yonder. That's the first thing, boy. Promise? Swear? With your life, boy!"

"Yes, Dad!"

"And then swear you'll keep the secret—about the money. No matter who asks. Never tell. Never let them know, boy! Not even Willa! Not even your Mom! Swear!"

"Yes! I swear!"

"—and when you grow up—you and Pearl—it'll be yours. Do you understand that, John? Do you swear? Say it, boy—say, I swear I'll guard Pearl with my life and I won't never tell about the money——"

John repeated it with thick, fumbling tongue.

"And *you*, Pearl! You swear, too!"

She did not know what the game was about but she laughed and said "Yes" and then fell to pouting again, hugging the wounded Jenny to her with fresh anger at what he had done to her baby. They heard the whine of motors and the two touring cars appeared in the bend in the lane at the corner of Jason Lindsay's orchard.

"Here they come! They're comin' yonder, boy! Mind now!"

"Where you goin' to, Dad?"

"Away, John! Away! Mind what I told you! And you, too, Pearl. You *swore*!"

And now the blue men were coming closer and she thought: this is part of the game too, and she watched them move cautiously through the tall grass, the tanned, grim faces white round the lips. There are guns in their hands and one of the men spits a dark jet of amber into the daisies every three or four steps he takes.

"Better drop the gun, Harper!"

They circle now, two of them fanning out below the smoke-house; two of them in the grape arbour; another standing among the yellow daisies with the blue gun ready in his hand.

"We've got you, Harper! Better give it up! We don't want them kids hurt!"

"I'm going now, John! Good-bye!"

"Dad! Who's them blue men yonder?"

"Never mind them! They come and I'm goin' away with them, John. That don't matter, boy. Just mind what you swore! Mind, boy!"

"Yes!"

Now the child leaps and awakens sweating and quivering under the sheet. He is lying in bed and the cold summer moon is a silver coin stuck to the window pane and Pearl is breathing softly in the bed beside him. He is wide awake now and he knows where he is and that it is Now instead of Then and yet he thinks: Just because I am awake don't mean that the dream isn't still going on out there. Now the blue men are moving up through the grass below the smoke-house again; now they are dragging him away to the big cars and there is a Dream Me watching it happen and when they are gone I will see it again in the grass, under the Queen Anne's lace, where it fell out of his coat pocket: the little brown paper bag with the jew's-harp in it for me and the toy baby bottle with the real rubber nipple for Pearl's doll. Because he never come home of a Friday once without bringing us a present. Not ever once.

III: *The River*

THE dangerous shadow was no more than a faint dappling of darkness among the sun-speckled shallows. Uncle Birdie hunched in the skiff and pointed a crooked finger.

"Yonder, boy! See! Right yonder! That's him—there by the big root!"

John bent suddenly to the skiff's stern and the shadow was gone. It had not moved, it had not fled; it had simply dissolved suddenly from the deep tobacco-dark water and then there was nothing but the sun dapples again.

"Meanest, orneriest sneak in the whole damn river, boy! A gar! Did you see him?"

"Yep. And he stole your bait, Uncle Birdie!"

"What? I——"

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"Meanest, orneriest sneak in the whole damn river, boy! A gar! Did you see him?"

"Yep. And he stole your bait, Uncle Birdie!"

Uncle Birdie blew his nose and cocked a wise blue eye sidelong at the boy in the boat.

"Your Ma don't know I cuss—does she, boy?"

"Shucks," sighed John. "She don't even know I'm here."

"Well, you ain't opposed are ye?—to cussin', I mean?"

"No."

"Tell you why I ask, boy, your step-pa bein' a preacher and all——"

John's lips grew thin as string and the old shadow flickered back behind his eyes again: the dark gar in the river of his mind.

Now Uncle Birdie reached out a scaly, hook-scarred finger and turned the child's face to meet his eyes. "Stepped on your toes that time, didn't I, boy. Well, no matter. I don't know what's wrong up at your place and I don't figure to ask. But just you remember one thing, Cap—if ever you need help you jus' holler out or come a-runnin'. Ol' Uncle Birdie's your friend. Now reach me that can of hooks yonder and I'll show you how to catch Mister Gar as neat as snappin' a tick off a dog's ear."

John relaxed and his face shone as he handed the old man the hooks. "Better pick out a big un, Uncle Birdie."

"Big un hell! I'll pick the littlest one of the lot! The one thing you got to understand about old Mister Gar is this, boy—he is a crafty sort. Why, there hain't nary hook in the land smart enough to hook Mister Gar. What a feller needs is mother wit—and a horse hair."

"A horse hair!"

"You heard me, Cap. A horse *tail* hair, mind ye—a good long one like this here. Now watch! First you loop your old horse hair and make a little lasso. See there?—and then you hang your baited hook right down in the middle of it—like so! See?"

John followed the old man's swift hands with brooding, enchanted eyes. "Won't he bust it, Uncle Birdie? Won't the gar bust the horse hair when he gits lassoed?"

"Shoot! A horse hair'll hold a whale, Cap. You jest watch now. You see old Mister Gar comes along and sneaks up on the bait and

when he gits his head right smack-dab in the middle of the noose we snap him up. Watch now!"

Uncle Birdie lowered his line cautiously into the placid shallows. John's eyes peered into the golden water until they ached, and every submerged can and leaf seemed the dark shadow for which they waited, every cloud or bird that passed above them in the afternoon cast its image in the mirroring river and seemed to the boy to be the black hunter. He thought: Like him. Like his ways. Sneaking around after the bait, only he ain't as smart as a gar—he don't know where the bait is so he can't steal it. Time ticked on and then suddenly, without warning, Uncle Birdie thrust his arms upward and the boat rocked like a cradle and the air was full of sparkling pearls of water.

"There! There, you slimy, bait-stealin', snag-toothed varmint!"

And John wiped the water from his face and saw the ugly, thrashing creature in the skiff bottom.

"Don't git your fingers in the way, boy!" cried Uncle Birdie, snatching off his mud-crusts shoe. He grasped it by the toe and flogged the thrashing nine-inch fish flat into the floor boards with the heel. Presently he peered, with John, at the broken body of the dark, knife-jawed fish in the skiff bottom among the cans and bilge.

"There now, boy! He's done!"

"Can we eat him, Uncle Birdie? Can we cook him?"

"Shoot! If you've got an appetite for bones and bitterness you can. That's what makes a body so derved mad about a garfish. They ain't fit for nothin' after you go to the trouble to catch 'em."

Birdie fetched the creature up gingerly by the tail and threw it far out into the river and watched with angry eyes as it floated away on the quickening current out near the channel. They had a panful of sunfish already and the sun was standing close to the crown of the mine tip across the river on the Ohio shore. So they rowed back to the landing and tied the skiff under the willows and wallowed up the shore again to the wharf boat.

John had grown restless with the coming of night. He watched Birdie cleaning the little fish while the skillet began to sizzle on



the fire in the stove. "I reckon I had better be goin', Uncle Birdie."

"What! You mean you caught all these here fish and then you hain't stayin' to taste 'em? Aw shucks no, Cap."

"Mom will be wonderin', Uncle Birdie. It's sundown."

"Well, boy, I reckon maybe you're right."

"You done a good job with Dad's skiff, Uncle Birdie."

"Nothin' at all, boy. She's your skiff now. But say!—I reckon I could have your permission to take her out once in a while?"

"Shucks yes, Uncle Birdie. You're practically a part owner. You fixed her up."

"By granny's, I'll take her down to the deep place first thing tomorrow and catch me some tobacky boxes. That's where they're thick. That deep place down by Jason Lindsay's pasture—there by the west fence."

Restlessly John turned his eyes to the window of the wharf boat and stared out into the peaceful river night. Dusk was gathering like smoke upon the land.

"Mind what I told you!" cried the old man. "Mind what I said—if you ever git in a crack—just give a holler—just come a-runnin'!"

John made no reply but scrambled up the plank and up the bricks of the landing and towards the river road. But the old man knew that he had heard: saw that the scared shoulders were a little braver now.

HE SAT alone by his bedroom window, watching the moon rise on the hills. The rain crow fluted its soft, grieving notes down in the meadow. And then a soft step sounded in the threshold behind him. He leaped and whirled with fright but saw that it was only Pearl.

"Ain't you hungry, John?"

"No."

"Mom sure was mad when she found your shoes was wet," prattled Pearl, not entirely displeased with John's punishment. "She sent you to bed without no supper."

He sighed, letting the silly female chatter roll off his weary head. But then the rich, maddening scent of fried chicken brushed against his senses and he turned just as she fetched a thick drumstick from under her little calico skirt and held it out to him.

"Here," she said, full of motherly solicitude. "Eat it, John."

"You swiped it?"

"Well, I wasn't really very hungry, John. I kept it off my plate."

He would have died for her then and took it from her hand and ate it ravenously, like an animal, hunched out of the moon's light, beneath the window sill. She watched him eat and sighed, warmed with something years beyond her, a need that moved her heart often when she pressed the doll against it in the dark.

"You feel better now, John?" she said, cocking her head.

"Sure. Thanks, Pearl."

"One time Mom sent me to bed without no supper and I got so hungry it was just awful, John."

At the window now he was watching Willa's stooped, nervous figure hurry down the tanbark walk towards the lane on her way to spend another evening at Cresap's Landing gossiping with Walt and Icey. Now we are alone again in the house with him, he thought. He will come upstairs directly and it will start again: the questions and the being scared. In a minute he will be standing there in the doorway and we won't even have heard his shoes on the stairway because he moves that way, like the dark shadow of the gar. Only there is nowhere in the world a hook small enough, a horse hair strong enough.

"Woolgathering, children?"

And he had been there all along, God only knows how long, thinking maybe they would let slip some little clue, some little crumb of bait and then he could move quickly like the gar and snatch it.

"There's my little Pearl!"

She cried out happily and ran to him and threw her arms round him and the doll Jenny fell forgotten by his shoe toes. John knew that he could not win this battle; the little girl was drawn irresistibly to the stepfather.

"Ah, such a sweet little soul," crooned Preacher, stroking her curls with his big, branded fingers. "We're not talking to John tonight—are we, Pearl? John's been bad."

Pearl's moon face turned slowly in the gloom and her finger rose to her pouting lips. "No," she said softly. "John's been bad."

"And John knows that if he disobeys again he'll get a taste of the strap—doesn't he, Pearl?"

"Yes," said Pearl, pressing herself closer to Preacher, farther from bad John. "The strap! You better be good, John!"

"Ah! Ah! We mustn't even speak to John, little sweetheart. John don't like to be spoken to. John is a feller who likes to keep *secrets*."

Pearl fell silent now; something had begun to tug: a wind blew from the east and one from the west and she could not tell which to hark to.

"John is a great one for secrets. Especially about *hiding things*! But *you and me*!" cried Preacher softly, intimately. "We don't keep secrets—do we?"

"No," whispered Pearl, doubtfully, and plucked at her lip with her finger.

"For instance," Preacher said cunningly, "I'll tell *you* a little secret!"

Pearl listened now. She loved secrets; all of them, that is, but the money secret and that secret scared her because it made John mad.

"The secret is this—I knowed your Daddy."

Pearl frowned. "The blue men," she said solemnly. "They come one day and took him away——"

"And you know what they did with him? Why, they brought him right to me. I'll bet you didn't know that, now did you?"

"Where's Dad?"

"Never mind about that just yet," said Preacher. "All things in due time, little bird. First just let me tell you what your Daddy said to me. He said: *Tell my little girl Pearl that there's to be no secrets between her and you.*"

John's back arched slowly like a bent elm stick. A single droplet of sweat crept down his shoulder blades like an ant and his eyes fell irresistibly to the sprawled cloth body of the doll by Preacher's shoes.



And the darkness softly breathed while Preacher whispered: "*Where's the money hid?*"

John had learned to throw during the summer that Ben had taught him to play ball. That is why the heavy hairbrush struck Preacher and not Pearl. He heard the black wood ring on the bone of cheek and forehead and heard the soft intake of breath and could not be sure for a moment if it had been Pearl's or Preacher's.

"You swore you wouldn't tell!" he screamed, stamping his feet. "You swore! You swore! You swore!"

And then he fell silent and Preacher said nothing but Pearl said: "You're bad, John! You hit Daddy with the hairbrush!"

And he lay against the window sill with the night at his back and thought: Why don't he say nothing? Why don't he put her down and come over and kill me or something instead of just standing there because even in the dark I can tell: he is smiling about it, smiling because of what he knows he will do to me later to get even. But Pearl didn't tell. Anyway she didn't tell!

"So you see?" Preacher chuckled presently, his voice as if nothing had happened. "We can't have anything to do with John—can we, little sweetheart? John's just plumb bad through and through."

"Yes. John's plumb bad!"

"And so," Preacher said cheerfully, "you and me will just lock poor, bad old John in the room, little bird——"

And watching them move towards the door he thought: But the doll is on the floor. So there is a chance. Because maybe she will forget about it when he takes her downstairs to talk.

"—and you and me will just go on downstairs to the parlour and have a nice little chat," Preacher finished. "About all kinds of secrets!"

She twisted suddenly in his grasp and stretched her twinkling fingers. "Miz Jenny! Miz Jenny!"

And Preacher stooped with a chuckle and caught up the flopping cloth body. "Just you and me and Miz Jenny," he said.

"We'll all have a nice little talk," Pearl cried happily and the door closed and the brass key turned and John watched the line of

golden light in the crack above the threshold as their shadows split it and then moved softly away towards the stairs.

WILLA walked down the dust of the lonely lane towards home. Off in the distance the single flame of gas blossomed in the yard lamp beneath the oak and Willa hurried towards it, yearning for the solace and comfort of her bed; there was so much praying to be done this night. More than ever this night her heart was full of the curious and nudging sadness that had come over her since her second marriage. But now something stayed her at the bottom step of the porch and she stood in the darkness with the fireflies drifting past her and heard Preacher's voice within the house and the prattle of the little girl in bright counterpoint to it and Willa thought: She, at least, loves him. John will never love him because he is full of the old evil of the father but my little Pearl loves him. They are together now in the parlour, she thought warmly. She paused, woman-like, curious, listening to their voices.

"John is bad," Pearl said. "We won't let him be with us, will we?"

"No indeed," boomed Preacher softly. "We'll have our own talk—just you and me."

"About secrets," said Pearl. "What secret shall I tell?"

"Well—you might start in by tellin' me how old you are!"

"That's no secret! I'm six—going on seven!"

"Well, sure, now! That's no secret, is it? Then how about this: What's your name?"

Pearl chuckled outrageously. "You're just fooling," she said. "That's no secret either. My name's Pearl!"

"Tut! Tut!" cried Preacher, in mock dismay. "Then I reckon I'll have to try again——" He paused a moment and Willa stood, smiling, listening happily.

"*Where's the money hid?*"

But now Pearl grew still again, biting her finger, thinking of plumb-bad John locked in the room like an evil prince.

"John's bad," she said softly.

"Yes! Yes! Never mind about John now. *Where's the money*

hid?" said Preacher, and the voice was choking a little, the madness so very close now to the dark pool's surface, the gar circling wildly in the sun-dappled shadows of the shoals.

"But John made me swear," she breathed.

And now he could contain it no more. The gar darted up from the green depths and now the ripples broke. His voice was as swift in the evening silence as the thump of a butcher's cleaver.

"Where's the money? Tell me, you little monster, or I'll tear your arm off!"

Willa's mind swung back into focus and she smiled and thought: I am standing here in the darkness and I am dreaming. It is a silly dream I am dreaming and directly I will wake up and I will pray again.

"Tell me!"

Pearl flung the doll to the carpet and tore loose from him and fled screaming through the golden lamplight just as Willa moved smiling across the threshold. Preacher caught himself against the hall tree and the face he turned to her seemed stunned: the head shook as if in disbelief at this miscalculation and then as swiftly as the drawing of a blind the face fell again to a mask of utter and timeless composure.

"Willa! I didn't expect you home so soon!"

"I was worried. The kids—— What's the matter with Pearl?"

He shrugged and passed the fingers named Love wearily across his brow. "It's that boy," he sighed with a patient smile. "He's been talking to her again about that—money. I locked him in his room, my dear. He's scared that poor little girl half out of her wits. Willa, what in time are we goin' to do with that boy?"

"I don't know," she breathed, moving past him towards the muffled voice of weeping in a closet somewhere, hoping that he would not touch her or follow, moving now with some old, undamaged instinct towards her child.

"AMEN!" she whispered at last, and he had lain there in the dark listening to her praying throughout that solid hour of whispering: of the pained and tortured catalogue

of her own transgressions and those of her children. "Are you through?" he said clearly.

"Yes, I'm through, Harry."

"—because I want to know something—and you'd better tell me the truth. The truth! What did Pearl tell you in there?—in the bedroom when you seen her to bed and heard her prayers? What did she say I done to her?"

Willa lay still for a while, smiling still, because it was not real.

"You know what, Harry."

"And you were listening outside the house so you knew it all anyway. Weren't you? What did you hear, Willa? Why did she say she was crying? *Answer me!*"

"It's not in the river is it, Harry? It's somewhere here among us—still tainting us with its stink. And Ben never told you he throwed it in the river. Did he?"

Then she thought: Why is my lip bleeding? Why can I taste the blood? And then she realized that he had struck her with the dry, shiny flat of his hand and it had happened only a second before though it seemed like a long time.

"—then the children know where it's hid?" she said. "John knows? Is that it?"

He had risen from the bed now and stood silhouetted against the square of moonlit window and his head was cocked a little towards the light as if harking to a whisper late in coming.

"So you must have known it all along, Harry," she said. "But that ain't why you married me, Harry. I know that much. It couldn't be that, because the Lord just wouldn't let it. He made you marry me so's you could show me the Way and the Life and the Salvation of my soul! Ain't that so, Harry?"

But he did not hear because now the night was filled with Whispers and they were for him. And she knew suddenly that he was not going to ever say anything more to her as long as she lived; that whatever was going to happen next would be not words but a doing. But still she kept on.

"—so you might say it was the money that brung us together," she chanted softly to the ceiling, not looking to see whatever it was

he was fumbling after among his clothes on the back of the rocking chair. "The rest of it don't matter, Harry—all the common old ways I used to lead with Ben! I got shed of them, Harry, like a body would take off a dirty old dress. Because that night in the hotel you showed me the way——"

She paused, listening to him and then thinking: But it still ain't enough. I must suffer some more and that's what he is making ready for me now: the last and total penance, and I will be clean. "Praise God!" she cried as he pulled down the window blind and the pagan moon was gone and something clicked and switched softly open and she heard the swift rushing whisper of his bare feet on the floor as he moved through the darkness towards the bed.

JOHN stirred in the valley of his pillow and opened his eyes. Something had moved in the dark and secret world of night. And even as he listened, the old house stirred. Now there was another sound and John lifted his face from the damp pillow because his breath against the cloth might have been the sound after all. But the noise continued and then he knew well what it was. It was the whinny-and-catch, the whinny-and-catch that the old Model T made when someone was cranking it. And now the motor caught, and after a bit the sound racketed off into the stillness and the night slid back again. John lay in the bed now thinking: What is it? Has he given it all up and stolen Dad's old car and gone away? Has he decided he won't never find that money and so he has quit and settled for the car and gone away for ever?

And so he fell asleep, his hand on the face of the doll whose painted eyes, staring between his fingers, kept a blind yet faithful vigilance against the night.

WALT SPOON was out in their garden, hoeing the second planting of beans, when Ikey came to the door and called him.

"Walt! Come quick!"

"What's wrong, mother?"

"Shhhhhh! Whisper, Walt! He's out there at one of the

tables. I don't want him to hear me. Keep your voice down."

"What's the matter? Who——?"

"It's Mister Powell," she whispered. "Somethin' awful has happened. Willa has run away!"

"No!"

"Walt, when that man told me the story I thought I'd faint. I didn't know what to *say*."

"Well, didn't she leave no word?"

"A note," said Icey, pressing her lips together and squinting one eye. "Course I never asked him what it said. She took out of the bed some time during the night and taken the old Model T—you remember—Ben's jalopy."

"Now then I'd never have thought that of Willa," said Walt, softly, sitting suddenly in a straight-backed chair by the sink. "Is he hit pretty bad by it?"

"He went all to pieces after he'd told me—threwed himself down at one of the tables and put his head down in his arms and went to prayin' and cryin' all at the same time! That's when I come a-runnin' for you, Walt."

Walt turned his eyes sadly towards the door, towards the sound of weeping. "What can we do, mother?"

"Well," she said. "I thought if you went and talked to him. Another man. Maybe if we was to get some idea where she could have run to—some hint she might have dropped. I mind last night she *did* seem upset when she left here. Didn't you mind that? The way she kept staring and biting her lip and she hadn't hardly set down till she was up again—wantin' to go?"

"Yes. I mind that. She left around ten it was."

Now the weeping beyond the door ceased and there was no sound but the measured ticking of the hall clock. "There," said Walt. "Sounds like he's got ahold of himself! You better wait out here, mother. I'll go see if there's anything we can do."

But she followed just the same, through the door into the ice-cream parlour, and peered round her husband's shoulder at Preacher at the table by the window. He was sitting up now and they were touched beyond words at his reddened eyes and the

little smile of courage that flickered at the corners of his lips.

"My dear, dear friends! Whatever would I do without you?"

"Mister Powell!" wailed Icey. "What could have possessed that girl?"

"Satan," said Preacher, simply. "It was him that possessed her."

"Didn't she—didn't she leave no word—no explanation?" said Walt.

"Yes. If you could call it that. A note. I tore it up and burned it."

"Didn't you have no inkling?" said Walt, sitting across from him at the table.

Preacher smiled bravely and blew his nose and then tucked his handkerchief away before he spoke.

"Yes," said Preacher. "From the first night. The night we was married and stayed at the Brass House."

"How's that?" said Walt.

"Why, she turned me out of the bed."

"No!" gasped Icey, while Walt blushed and fumbled for his pipe.

"Yes!" said Preacher. "She still longed for the old life, I reckon. Carousin' of a night and beer drinkin'—and that other. I couldn't give her that kind of life. I wouldn't if I could, dear hearts. I taken one look at them little ones of hers and I said to myself: Better that a millstone should be fastened round my neck——"

Icey was weeping again now, sobbing in swift fat little gasps.

"And what do you figure to do, Mister Powell?" said Walt, puffing on his old pipe.

"Do? Why, what would any man of God do?" cried Preacher, standing up. "Stay and take care of them little kids. Maybe He meant all this to happen this way, my friends. Maybe He never meant for a woman like Willa to taint their young lives and so He sent me——"

"Praise God!" choked Icey.

"That's mighty fine of you, Reverend," said Walt, dabbing at a moistness in the corner of his eye. "Mighty brave, I'd say. I just wouldn't never have thought that of Willa. Runnin' off that way

and leavin' a husband and them two kids. You say she left a note?"

"A scrawl," said Preacher. "Something about how she had failed as a mother and a wife and she might as well run off somewhere where people was as bad as she was. I burned it. I tore it up and burned it—it stank so strong of hellfire!"

"Amen!"

"I knowed she was goin'," Preacher said.

"How?"

"Because she tarried around the kitchen for a good half hour after I'd gone up to bed," smiled Preacher, twining the fingers of his hands together. "And when the clock struck eleven-thirty I went downstairs to see what was wrong."

"And what——?"

"She'd found a fruit jar full of dandelion wine that the husband—Harper—had hid away somewhere in the cellar."

"You mean she——?"

Preacher nodded. "She was drinking," he said.

Icey stopped weeping and stared, scandalized.

"Her flesh," smiled Preacher, "was just too full of it for it not to git the upper hand, dear friends—too full of Pride and Sin and Self-Indulgence! I tried to save her——"

"I know you did, Reverend," cried Icey. "Oh, I know how you tried!"

"But it was too late," said Preacher, cracking his knuckles together as his fingers began to twist. "The devil got there first! You see——?" And he held up the locked hands and twisted them some more and Icey and Walt stared transfixed at the writhing fingers with the blue letters of LOVE and HATE warring together in mid-air. At last the fingers of the left hand closed over the fingers of the right and Preacher brought both hands down with a mighty crash to the table top. "The devil wins sometimes!" he whispered in a hoarse, choking voice. "But can't nobody say I didn't do my best to save her!"

THE afternoon was hot: the morning coolness from the river was gone and the air lay like a shimmering, yellow sea over the



bottom lands. Still, in the dark cellar of the old house it was cold and dank, with a smell in the air of autumn: of apples and spider-webs and winter coal. Pearl shivered and hugged her doll. "John, why do we have to hide?"

It was dark behind the shelves of preserving jars, behind the barrel of stale winter apples and the bench with its boxes of onions and turnips and potatoes. Yet she could see the white shape of John's face clearly, and the dark eyes burning in it.

"Because!" he whispered furiously.

"John, where's Mom?"

He thought: Mom is dead. Because she wouldn't go away and leave *him* that way. She might leave us but she wouldn't leave him and so she must be dead somewhere.

"Someone," he whispered, "is after us, Pearl!"

He thought: If I scare her too bad then she will start crying and he will hear it and come find us. But maybe if I scare her a little bit she will shut up.

"Why is someone after us, John?"

"Never mind about that. Just be still, Pearl!"

"I want to go upstairs," she said. "It's cold and spidery down here. I'm hungry, John."

He grasped her firmly by the shoulders. "Now listen to me, Pearl," he whispered. "You and me is runnin' off tonight. If we stay here somethin' awful will happen to us."

"Won't Daddy Powell take care of us?"

"No," he said. "That's just it! No!"

"Where are we goin', John?"

"I don't know yet. Somewheres, Pearl. When it's night. Just do like I tell you, Pearl."

She fell silent again and they waited. There was a single barred cellar window in the stone wall above the coal bin. And they fastened their eyes to that single square of world, watching as it faded to grey and then, as twilight fell, winked shut like the lid of an eye. They could hear him moving about in the dark house above as he had throughout all that dark day, singing to himself and then stopping a spell to listen, to poke and search, and then call their names in that tight, shivering voice of outrage. After a bit they heard the footsteps move along the hall and directly the cellar door opened and Pearl knew by the cold, tightening fingers on her arm that John meant for her to be still.

"Children?" called the voice softly from the stairs.

And then a portion of the whitewashed wall sprang suddenly into light as he moved down the steps with a candle in his hand and stopped halfway, straining his angry eyes into the shadows.

"I know you're here, children," he said, not shouting, not angry-sounding at all. "So you'd better come out before I come find you myself. I can feel myself gettin' awful mad, children."

"John?" Pearl whined faintly. "He said——" John's hand clapped quickly to her mouth and his fingers pressed into her cheek.

"I hear you whisperin', children. So I know you're down there. My patience has run out, children. I'm comin' to find you now."

And his footsteps were quick and angry on the creaking steps and now the whole cellar was alive with new shadows and stretching light from the moving candle in his fingers.

"This is your last chance, my dears. I'm just gettin' played out. I'm just gettin' so mad I won't be responsible!"

Now the whole web of light and dark tore loose and stretched itself and danced again as he moved towards the coal bin and bent to peer inside. "Children!" And then they all heard the voice calling from the kitchen and John thought for one moment of salvation: It's Mom come back! It's her upstairs in the kitchen! Nothin' has happened to her after all!

"Yoohoo! Mister Powell!"

They could hear him shuffling back across the stone towards the steps and John counted them as the footsteps mounted to the door to the kitchen.

It was Ikey Spoon, and Preacher closed the cellar door and they could hear him greeting her in that coaxing, warm voice he could put on when he wanted. "Here!" Ikey was saying. "It's just a little hot supper I fixed for you and the children. Walt and me got to thinkin' about you lonely and helpless over here without a woman in the house and it seemed the least we could do."

Then it was his voice again, fawning over the supper she had brought and his voice fell and John knew what it was he would be saying. "Yes! Yes! They're down there playing in the cellar and they won't mind me when I call them and I just don't know what to do. It just seems a little too much with everything else on my mind today—Willa and all. Would you mind trying?"

The door flew open again and now it was Ikey's voice, clear and commanding. "John! Pearl!"

"It's as if I didn't have enough on my mind," Preacher was whimpering. "The grief and burden of what the mother has done——"

Ikey's voice crackled with authority now and John knew that the jig was up; the business of disobeying a woman was somehow too much for him. "John! Pearl! You get up out of that cellar this very minute! Come on! Shake a leg! I won't have you worryin' poor Mister Powell another minute. Hurry!"

John appeared, blinking, and moved into the gas-lit kitchen and Pearl followed, hugging the doll sheepishly before her shamed eyes.

"Now just look at you!" cried Ikey, brushing the cobwebs from the little one's curls. "Dust and filth from head to toe! If that ain't a poor way to serve Mister Powell on a sad day like this!"

She turned to Preacher and raised her eyebrows. "Want me to take them up and wash 'em good?"

"Thank you no. Thank you, dear Ikey. No, I'll tend to them."

"Don't be too hard on them, Reverend," she smiled. "Like as

not they've took it hard—the mother runnin' off that way. Poor lambs! Poor motherless children!" Preacher chuckled and reached out his hand and ran the fingers named LOVE through Pearl's tumbling, dusty locks. "I've been thinking," he said, "of something that might ease the pain. I thought I might take them away for a week or two. To my sister's—down at Marietta. The change might help. A different scene. Good country food for a while. A kindly Christian woman to tend them."

"Well now! Hear that, children? Don't that sound nice?" She gave Pearl's head a final pat and pinched John's cold, livid cheek and moved out on to the porch with Preacher.

"Remember now, Mister Powell. If you need anything—any time—don't be afraid to call on us. Mind now! Good night!"

And in a breath her fat round figure was a small shape, bobbing away into the darkness under an early moon. Preacher came back into the kitchen and smiled at the children by the pump.

"Weren't you afraid, my lambs?" he said softly. "Down there in all that dark?"

For a moment the paraffin lamp teetered and rocked on the littered table but then the old hands darted out and caught it and steadied it before it fell. Uncle Birdie snatched his bottle from under the rocker and filled the tin cup half-full again. Then he began shaking worse than ever, teeth chattering like an angry ground-hog, and he knew suddenly that whisky wasn't going to help him that night: it would take more than that to exorcise the day's phantoms. Earlier he had considered lighting his lantern and taking Ben Harper's skiff back down along the shore to the deep place to see if it was really there: what he had seen that morning. But he thought that seeing it again would drive him crazy with fear and he would fall out of the boat and drown. Bess would understand why he was so powerfully and brutally drunk this night. Bess would forgive him his intemperance once he told her what he had seen that morning in the deep place below Jason Lindsay's west fence. He steadied himself on his way to the old chest by the stove and fetched out the faded cardboard photograph

in the cheap-jack tin frame, and when he had stumbled back to his rocker again he propped the little picture against the lamp and fell back into his cushions.

"Now, Bess! Don't go preachin' at me again. I'm drunk and I know it but hear me out, woman, and you'll understand. Now, Bess! Don't scold! This mornin'!" he choked. "I borried Ben Harper's skiff and went down to the deep place along the shore there below Jas' Lindsay's west fence. I 'lowed to catch me a few catfish for supper, Bess." He leaned towards the picture with starting eyes and jaws agape and his hands clamped to the table's edge.

"Under—the—stern," he grated. "That's whar I seen it! I jedged it was ten foot down. Bess, you know how clear the water is down there except in flood stage. Well, that's right where it was, Bess—Ben Harper's old Model T and her in it! God save me!—her in it, Bess—just a-sittin' there in a white gown and her eyes lookin' at me and a great long slit under her chin just as clean as a catfish gill!—and her hair wavin' lazy and soft around her like meadow grass under flood waters. Willa Harper, Bess! That's who! Down there in that old Model T with her eyes starin' and that slit in her throat just like she had an extry mouth. You hear me, Bess?"

He paused, choking and gasping with fresh terror, and snatched up the bottle and greedily sucked from it. "And there hain't a mortal human I can tell but you, Bess," he cried. "For if I go to the Law they'll hang it on to me." He staggered sobbing to his feet and wallowed his way to the door and stared off wildly into the darkness towards the shore to southward, where the tiny lamps of the shanty boats gleamed in the dark. "One of them," he whispered. "It was one of them shanty-boat trash done it. But they'll think it was me. They'll think it was old Uncle Birdie!"

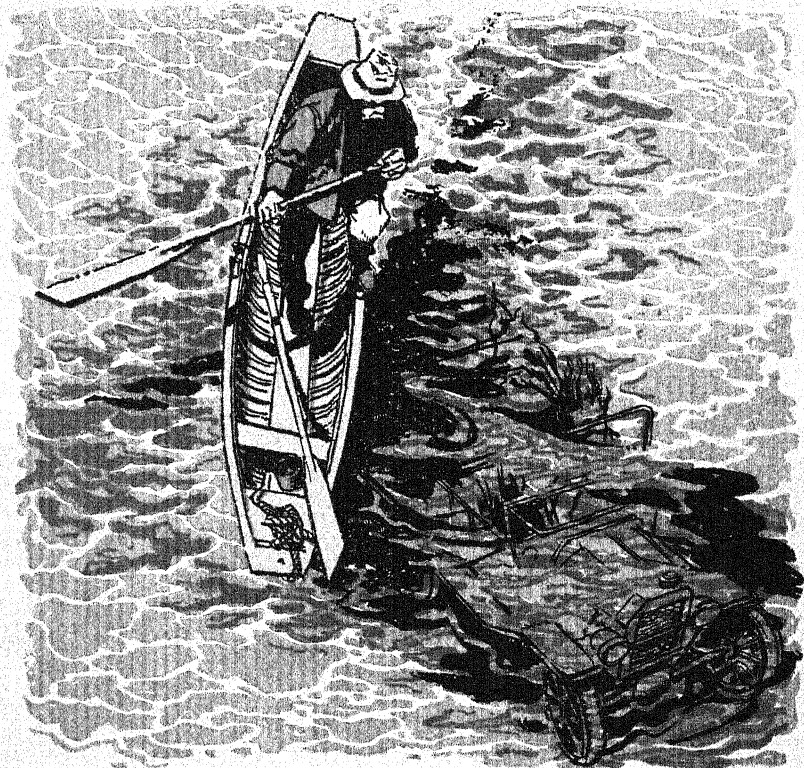
"I'm hungry, *John*. Let's go downstairs and eat supper."

"The door's locked!"

"Why did Daddy lock us in our rooms? Were you bad again, *John*?"

"Hush up! I'm thinkin', *Pearl*."

"What about?"



"About gettin' away. Listen to me, Pearl. You've got to mind me tonight."

"All right, John."

They huddled in the bedroom, hearing Preacher in the kitchen eating the hot supper Ikey had brought and taking his time about it because they would be there as long as he wanted them there.

"No matter what he says!" whispered John. "No matter what he does, Pearl—remember what you swore!"

"Yes." He thought: But there are ways. He will take her on his lap again and start in again about the secrets and she will giggle directly because she is too dumb to know what he really wants.

Preacher had finished his supper now and was singing while he rinsed the dishes. And when the house grew still again John thought: He is coming up them stairs right this very minute, I bet, and directly he'll unlock the door and we will hardly hear the key.

"Hello there, children! Guess what? I saved you some supper. Have we got good appetites tonight, my lambs?"

"I'm hungry," said Pearl.

"Why, sure you're hungry. And guess what's waitin' for you. There's fried chicken and candied sweets and apple cobbler!"

"Can I have milk, too?"

"Yes, little bird. To be sure!" he cried, gathering her gently into his arms. "But first of all we'll have a little talk——" Pearl frowned and put her finger in her mouth, remembering the night he twisted her arm, "——about our secrets!" he said softly.

"No," whispered Pearl.

"No? And why, pray tell?"

"Because John said I mustn't!"

"Ah, but we both know what a bad, bad boy John is. In fact, I think we had better punish John tonight for the way he's been carryin' on lately. But we'll attend to John later, won't we, my lamb? Now let's just you and me talk. We'll have a nice little chat and we won't even let John open his mouth."

The moon had come up: a sickly wisp of silver in the last phase, hanging like a harvester's sickle in the apple tree below the grape arbour.

"Do you have any secrets you'd like to tell me, Pearl?"

"Yes," she whispered, torn by those strange winds of yes and no.

"*What is it?*"

She was still, her eyes moving gravely back and forth between the two of them.

"The money," she said softly and darted a glance at John.

"Ah, of course! The money. And where is it, little darling?"

She began to sob. "John said——" she choked softly.

Preacher slapped his knee and his eyes crackled dangerously.

"Never—mind—what—John—said!"

He thrust her to the floor and towered above them, radiant with

fresh fury. "I've told you once, my girl, that John don't matter! Can't you understand that? Eh? John is a meddler! John is a nasty, mean little——! *Stop snivelling!* Looky here a minute! In my hand——here!"

He shot his left hand into the alpaca coat and brought out the knife and bounced it twice in his palm. "See this now? Know what it is? This is a knife! Want to see something cute? Looky now!" He clasped the bone handle in his palm and, closing it, touched the button lightly with the finger named H and now the six-inch silver blade, honed to paper keenness, flicked out like the clever bright wing of a toy bird. Pearl smiled. "*This,*" said Preacher, "is what I use on meddlers, my lamb! *Get me? For meddlers!* John would be sorry he meddled! In fact, if John so much as breathes a word——*if he so much as opens his mouth——*"

Pearl ran over and reached a hand to take the bright toy.

"No! No, my lamb! Don't touch it! Now don't touch my knife! That makes me mad! Very, very mad!"

So she hugged the doll, humbled by this new sharpness in his voice, but then his face fell into softer lines as he smiled.

"Just tell me now," he said. "Where's it hid?"

Pearl turned her eyes to nasty, bad John, stunned and frozen beside the white water pitcher on the washstand.

"The money!" whispered Preacher, bending a little now, and flicking his tongue across his quivering lips. "Think, baby! Think of all the nice things we can buy with it! A new dress for dolly and a new pair of shoes for you!"

"Where's Mom?"

"Ah, that's a secret, too, little bird. And I can't tell you my secrets till you've told me yours."

"Can John have a present, too?"

"Well, I reckon so. We'll even buy a present for nasty, naughty John." Pearl sighed and turned her awful eyes to the boy.

"But I swore," she breathed. "I promised John I wouldn't tell!"

"JOHN—DOESN'T—MATTER!" he cried, leaping to his feet. "Can't I get that through your head, you poor, silly, disgusting little wretch!"

Pearl's mouth quivered and a large tear brimmed suddenly in each eye.

John thought: Now there's nothing more for me to do but to do the bad thing. I must tell a Lie.

"I'll tell!" he cried out. "It ain't fair to make Pearl tell when she swore she wouldn't! That's a Sin! *I'll tell!*"

Preacher's eyes crinkled and then he turned to Pearl and smiled brightly. "Well, I declare!" he chuckled. "Sometimes I think poor John will make it to heaven yet! Did you hear that, little lamb? John's going to be the one to tell us after all."

And now his eyes snapped back to John like a whip and the voice meant business. "All right, boy! Where's the money?"

"In the cellar!" cried John. "Buried in the floor behind the big stone jar of pickled peaches!"

Preacher picked up the knife and pressed it closed in the palm of his hand. "It'll go hard, boy," he said, "if I find out you're lyin' to me!"

"I ain't lyin'!" cried John valiantly, while he prayed that Pearl would hold her peace throughout this crucial ruse. "Go look for yourself! It's all there—buried under a stone in the cellar! Right where Dad stuck it that day!"

"All right. Come along—the both of you—to the cellar!"

"Don't you believe me?"

"Why, sure, boy. Sure. But just the same—come along. I'll risk no tricks."

He made them walk ahead of him down the stairway and John thought: Pearl, hush! Pearl, don't say nothin'! Please, God! And he took his sister's hand and led the way down the cellar steps while Preacher followed, holding a candle high in his hand

"Now where, boy? And mind now—no tricks; I can't abide liars!"

"Yonder!" John pointed. "Behind that stone jar! Under the stone in the floor!"

Preacher was panting with excitement as he spilled tallow on the lip of the great stone jar and set the candle in it; then he fell to his knees and brushed the dust away with shaking fingers.

"Why, this ain't no stone floor, boy. It's concrete ! There hain't no stone here for nothin' to be buried under !"

Now Pearl could hold herself in no longer. "John made a Sin," she said softly. "John told a lie."

Preacher got to his feet slowly, his face gone as yellow as the flesh of a pawpaw before the frost. The hand slid slowly into the coat pocket and when it came out again the boy saw the striped tan and black of the bone hasp and the dull shine of the button.

"Yes, Pearl. John told a lie. John just never stopped to think that the Lord ain't the only one that hates a liar."

John watched, thinking: It's so quick you can't see it; his thumb moves and the silver tongue licks out and there is just a little click. John did not move, not even when the knife was touching him. The blade was pricking the soft flesh beneath the ear and Preacher's hand was closing round the nape of his neck with his free fingers.

"The Lord's a-talkin' to me just as plain, John ! He's a-sayin' : A liar is an abomination before mine eyes. But the Lord is a God of Mercy, boy ! He's a-sayin' : Give Brother Ananias another chance. Now speak, boy ! Speak ! Where's it hid ? Speak before I cut your throat and leave you to drip like a hog hung up in butcherin' time !" Pearl commenced sobbing with terror and Preacher whirled on her, smiling. "You could save him, little bird. You could save John if you was to tell."

"Pearl, shut up ! Pearl, you swore !"

"Shut up, you little monster, let her speak ! Where, Pearl ? Where ?"

"Inside my doll ! Inside my doll !" she screamed, and Preacher drew back, his jaw sagging, and then he threw back his head and roared out a single, hoarse cry of laughter.

"In the doll ! Why, sure ! Sure ! What a clever one Brother Harper was ! The last place anyone would look ! In the doll !"

And he went for Pearl just as John moved, knocking the candle into the peaches and then feeling for Pearl in the blackness and grabbing her little damp hand ; dragging her screaming away into the darkness towards the steps. Preacher's shrill bleat of anger

filled the cellar with shattering echoes and they heard the stone jar of fruit go crashing and slopping over among the rakes and hoes against the shelves and then a cascade of bursting preserving jars as Preacher stumbled, groping, and thrust his hand among them. And John thought: If only I can get Pearl and me and the doll up them steps and lock him down here there will be a chance. They were halfway up the steps now and the door to the kitchen was ajar before their eyes, a bright bar of lamplight and safety in that hell of blackness, and behind them they could hear Preacher go down cursing again in another welter of crashing jars and Pearl was screaming in a high, keening wail. John slipped on the very top step at the landing and almost carried them both backward down the steps and into the hunter's arms and in that dreadful instant they heard the scramble and slap of his feet on the steps behind them and then they were over the threshold and John slammed the door behind him with all his might. Preacher screamed in anguish and John felt the fingers crush between the door and the jamb and so he drew back and slammed again and pushed the door tight and before Preacher could rally, the iron bolt flew home. John sank, gasping, against the wallpaper and listened to him, crouched at the top of the steps like a trapped fox, his mouth pressed against the crack of the door, breathing hoarsely, sobbing faintly, thinking, scheming.

"Children?" Cajoling and gentle, the voice now.

John thought: The river. That is the only place. Uncle Birdie Steptoe. Yes, the river now. Quick! Quick!

"Children, won't you listen to me for a minute? It was all just a joke. Aw, have a heart now. Children, can't you see? The only reason I wanted that money is so's you could have it. Listen, little Pearl! You'll listen to me, won't ye, little bird? Little lamb? Listen. I'll make a bargain with you both. That's what I'll do. Yessir, if you'll let me out I promise I'll go away tonight and never come back. Pearl? You listenin', little lamb? Want your Mommy back, lamb? Want me to go get her right now?"

"John!"

"Hush, Pearl! Come on!"

"Children! Children! Are you listenin' to me? Open the door! ANSWER ME, YOU SPAWN OF THE DEVIL!"

And now there came a sudden rain of hammering fists against the door and the old hinges strained and squealed as he set his shoulder to the panels again and again. Pearl screamed as John snatched her hand and dragged her towards the kitchen door and into the night. Behind him in that stricken house John could hear the thundering shocks on the failing cellar door: a rhythm and a clamour no louder than the thunder of his pulses as he and the girl, clutching her doll, fled pell-mell down the lane to Cresap's Landing, to the wharf boat, to the river, to Uncle Birdie Steptoe.

THE landing was stone-silent except for the drowsy chirp of a shanty-boat guitar down in the mists below the willows. John spied the ruddy, dusty glow of Uncle Birdie's smoking lamp in the window and led Pearl stumbling down the bricks to the wharf boat. He could not call out: his breath was gone and he dared not call out lest behind him the hunter might be listening. In the doorway to the wharf boat he stared at the sprawled figure of the old riverman on the cot.

"Uncle Birdie! Uncle Birdie! It's me—John Harper! And Pearl! You said to come a-runnin' if we needed you!" The boy's hands tugged at the old man's bony shoulders beneath the worn blue shirt. He slipped to his knees now, weeping unashamedly. "Uncle—Birdie! Oh—please! *Please wake up!*"

Something roused in the old man then and he lifted himself on one elbow, staring at the pair with starting, unblinking eyes, glaring wildly at these children who had come to plague him for the thing he hadn't done.

"Never done it, boy! Never done such a terr'ble, terr'ble thing! Shanty-boat trash done it! Shanty-boat trash!"

"Hide us," whispered John. "He's comin' after us, Uncle Birdie! It's him that's after us—Mister Powell!"

Uncle Birdie scowled and deep beneath the troubled fogs a faint lamp of comprehension gleamed for an instant. But then the old fear swept back like night mists and he shrank against the wall,

warding off John's wild stare as if it were a blow.

"But I never done it, boy! I never done it! I never!"

John got to his feet, knowing suddenly how lost it all was. He turned his eyes now to the black door, into the darkness from which he knew would appear in a matter of seconds the face of Salvation with a knife in his lettered fist. There is still the river, he thought. Dad's skiff is down there under the willows.

He took Pearl's hand and led her out into the night again. As an ear pressed to a steel rail can sometimes catch the thunder of a far-off train, John's whole flesh sensed Preacher's imminent approach. And even as he caught Pearl's hand again and dragged her into the pokeberry bushes towards the skiff, the shadow of the man broke suddenly into the lamplight on the street above them. John's feet slipped and sucked in the mud and the weeds tore at his legs as he led her stumbling on towards the boat, but Preacher had heard them and now they heard his sweet, tenor voice call after them.

"Hurry, Pearl! Oh please hurry, Pearl!"

He thought desperately: Maybe the skiff is gone. Maybe one of them shanty-boat trash borrowed it tonight.

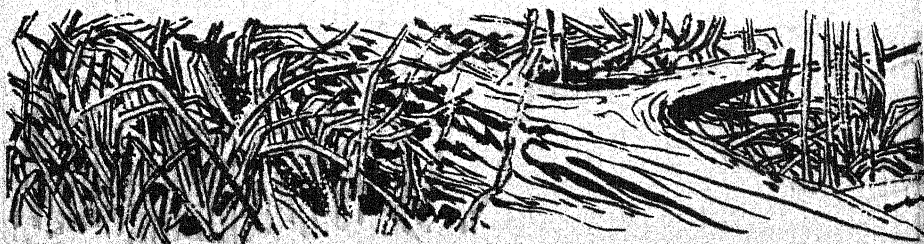
"John, where——"

"Hush! Hush! Hurry, Pearl!" Then he spied it, the bow jutting sharply in the blanketing mists.

"Children! CHILDREN!"

They could hear him above them, thrashing down through the high brush, fighting his way towards them.

"Get in the skiff, Pearl! Oh hurry!"





"John!" she cried out, pausing. "That's *Daddy* calling us!"

He uttered a sob of despair and thrust her brutally over the skiff side and down among the bait cans and fish heads in the bottom. Now they heard Preacher hacking at a vine that had entangled him, not ten feet away, and John knew well what it was he hacked with. John's hand grappled for the oar the way poor old Uncle Birdie had shown him that day and the way he had watched men do it since the first time he had seen the river. But they moved not an inch in the muck, so tightly was the skiff grounded.

"Ah, my lambs! So there you are!"

John thrust with every ounce of flesh and bone, and the boat moved. But now Preacher had cleared the brush and was stepping swiftly through the mud towards them. John gave a final thrust that nigh burst his heart and the skiff swung suddenly into the gentle current.

"Wait! Wait, you little monsters! Wait! WAIT! WAIT!"

Even in that faint show of moonlight, even with the mists wisping and curling against the land, they could see the livid, twisted, raging oval of his face: the mouth gaping and sick with hatred. Now he wallowed rapidly towards them through the shallows, and then he staggered and fell, floundering in the water for a moment and then rising again, splashing after them.

But now the current in the vast, dark river caught them upon its warm wing and the boat began moving into the channel while still they could hear Preacher: every sound drifting clean and sharp across the flat water: he was back on shore now where he could follow better, clawing his way through sumac and pokeberry, cursing and shouting, but now they were moving beyond him, they were free.

"John?" gasped Pearl. He dragged his eyes to her, not answering, collapsing face down upon the crook of his arm upon the stern: spent and exhausted even in the face of this near miraculous exodus. "We forgot to take Daddy," she said.

"WALT! Oh, Walt! Look here what the mailman brought this morning! I told you all your frettin' was for naught!"

Walt took the cheap, coloured postcard from her hand and read aloud :

"Dear Walt and Icey : I bet you been worried and give us up for lost. Took the kids down here with me for a visit to my sister Elsie's farm. Thot it would do us all a world of good after so much trubble and heartache. A little change of senery will do us good for a month or so. At least the kids will git a plenty of good home cooking and some meat on their bones. God be with you till we meet again from yr. devoted Harry Powell."

"Now ain't you relieved, Walt?"

"Well, sure I am. But don't forget—you was worried, too, mother. Him takin' off with the kids like he done that night and never a word of good-bye."

"But that would be like him," she said. "Feelin' he'd already been burden enough in his time of need." Icey snuffled and scurried off to the kitchen, glowing with happiness and relief.

Walt scowled at the card. Something itched and worried behind his eyes, far back in his mind, and yet he said nothing, thought nothing. Icey came out of the kitchen then, her eyes sparkling.

"Walt Spoon, I think I know the real reason why Mister Powell took them kids and left the other night."

He looked at her, saying nothing.

"Walt, I bet Willa's run aground somewhere and sent for him to fish her out again. It would be like him to go and lift her up and forgive."

"Yes, I reckon it would——"

Thinking of the wonderful thing that Preacher was doing, Icey stuck the postcard in the frame of the big mirror behind the counter, above the gleaming jars of licorice and mints. She stared at the bright penny postcard alongside the faded carnival photo of the sheepish, laughing girl that had once been Willa Harper.

THE PEOPLE saw him that August in a dozen little towns along the river : the quiet, brooding man on the horse. He would ride into town early in the morning and they could tell by his clothes and the stubble of beard that he had spent the night in some far-

mer's hayloft and fed his horse on some farmer's corn. They paid him no particular never mind because it was a depression year—a time of wanderers on the land. He would tell them he was an evangelist and hitch his horse to a fence post and fetch a dusty Scripture from the pocket of his ragged coat and then preach a half-hour sermon—often about children: about how an ungrateful child is an abomination before the eyes of God and about how the world was fast going to damnation because of impudent and disobedient youngsters flying in the face of Age.

"Preacher. How many kids you got?"

He turned and glared at the man, shading his squinting eyes. "I had two, brother. But the Lord seen fit to take them away."

"Well, meanin' no smartness, Preacher, but if you had the five I've got to put up with and feed six times a day you'd know how true them words you just preached really was. And on top of that, my ol' woman wanted to take in them two wild savages Gailey Flowers chased out of his tomato garden last week!"

"The which? Say that again, brother. Two, you say?"

"Two little kids. Orphans, I reckon. Old Gailey Flowers has that piece of land down below Hannibal Station and he caught them kids stealin' tomatoes there the other mornin' about sun-up."

"When was that? When, brother?" He held the man's arm.

"It was a Wednesday morning!" called an old man from the crowd. "My woman seen 'em, too. They come up to the house a-beggin' for bread and bacon. Shucks, we hain't had bacon on our table since '31." There was something now that they all sensed about Preacher that seemed hungry and unclean. His lips quivered, his eyes were too bright, his fingers too pleading as he went round to each of them, laying hands upon their arms, begging for more details about the children. What they saw in his face was not loving-kindness, but the dry-toothed cunning of the hound on the hunt. They moved away from him.

And so the dusty stranger moved on from town to town: sniffing, nosing under scrap heaps of corner gossip for a word, for a clue, his nose and eyes ever to windward, moving with an implacable revenge after the ones who had cheated him.

Some time before autumn, he knew that he would come suddenly upon a farmhouse, lazy and golden in the dusk. And there, perhaps playing in the dust beside a cistern, he would see them at last: a little girl with an old doll and a little boy with no toy at all, their haunted faces like moon-flowers in the dusk.

ALL THE long day after their escape the children drifted upon the swift river channel and then night dropped abruptly upon them and there were no lights but the stars and the shanty-boat lamps along the shore. They fell asleep, hungry and frightened.

In the morning John awakened with a sprig of willow leaves tickling his face. He saw that Ben Harper's skiff had providently run aground on a sand bar near the mouth of a creek. They were ravenously hungry. John shrewdly dragged the boat on to the bar as far as he could and covered it with broken branches so that they could safely leave it and forage for their breakfast among the bottom farms. John spied an orchard far up beyond a bluff above the river road and told Pearl to wait in the pasture while he went to fetch them a shirtful of fruit for their morning meal. Presently he appeared again, running towards her and there were cries behind him among the little peach trees and he beckoned her to follow him and they fled again down the pasture to the shore. The farmer did not pursue them there and they sat on a large, flat rock, disconsolate and hungrier than ever, chewing on blades of sour grass, and glumly surveyed the grey expanse of morning river.

"John, when are we going home?"

"Just wait now, Pearl!"

"But if we went home, John," she reasoned stubbornly, "Daddy would fix us our breakfast. And Mom is terribly worried, John."

But he knew better than that. John knew that his mother was gone. She was as blurred now in his hopes—even in his memory—as the misty, half-forgotten figure of the hanging man on the red bricks of the wall. Preacher had done away with her in some dreadful and final way. Preacher and the blue men had finished her.

By late afternoon hunger had emboldened them to seek a farmhouse kitchen for a meal. The fat wife stopped her churning in the

cool of the casaba vines along the stone porch and stared at them.

"Hungry are ye? Well, where's your folks?"

"We ain't got none," said John, and hearing the words in his own ears gave a sudden, dreadful substantiation to the fact.

"Well, sit down there and don't come trackin' up my porch with your muddy feet. I'll see if there's any potato soup left. Gracious, such times when youngins run the roads!"

She waddled off to the kitchen, quarrelling with life, and returned presently with big thick bowls of hot potato soup and three thick slices of home-made bread spread over with cinnamon-sweet apple butter. When they were finished John sensed that it would be wise to leave. "Go away!" the woman's eyes seemed to say. "Go away because you remind me of something it's better to forget."

"Come on, Pearl," he sighed, rising and reaching for her hand.

"Are we going home, John?" He remembered a barn he had seen on another farm up the river road: a grey, frame building set back three hundred yards from the home of its owner, under the green umbrella of an enormous sycamore. As they drew near, the moon rose round and full across the river in the bluffs. Down in the farmhouse someone was playing a mouth harp and a girl was singing and the lamp in the kitchen window was a dusty orange glow and John yearned, for an instant, for the kindness of a room and the sound of a voice that was loving kin.

"Are we going to stay in that big house, John?"

"It ain't a house, Pearl. It's a barn."

He found the ladder to the hayloft and showed Pearl how to climb it and presently they were settled in a great, prickling bed of sweet, fresh timothy with a fine broad window that surveyed the vast and silent bottom lands for miles on either side and beyond it the dark river. They fell asleep thus, among the aromatic hay. John had not been sleeping more than an instant when he heard it. Plain and clear as the song of the now stilled field birds he heard the faint, sweet rise of that unforgettable voice.

*Leaning, leaning! Safe and secure from all alarms!
Leaning, leaning! Leaning on the everlasting arms!*



John held his breath, harking, his eyes burning and straining through the dust of moonlight, ready to pick out the tiniest motion anywhere upon the vast, spreading tableland between the barn and the river. And then in the distance John saw him on the road, emerging suddenly from behind a tall growth of red-bud: a man on a huge field horse, moving slowly and yet with a dreadful plodding deliberation up the river road. The man and horse were as tiny as toys in that perspective and yet, even in those diminished proportions, John could make out the evil line of those familiar shoulders. The singing did not stop and the figure, moving still in that sinister slowness, passed directly below the house and was obscured again by a tall growth of pawpaws and still the voice continued unabated while John huddled in the hay with thundering heart. And even long after he had passed, lost in the moonbeams of the lower farms, John could still hear the faint, sweet voice and he thought: Don't he never sleep? Or does he just keep

on hunting me and Pearl to the end of the world?

At daybreak the children stole down to the barn door and when John had brushed all the straw from Pearl's skirt he made her put on her brightest morning smile so that they might present themselves at the farmer's kitchen for a bit of hot breakfast. The gaunt young farmer's wife cried and prayed over them until they were sticky and smothered with her ministrations; they fled before she could begin to ply them with questions. With the edge gone from their hunger and with unaccountably cheerful hearts the children returned to the river and set off again in Ben Harper's skiff. Pearl sat in the skiff's stern playing with her doll while John fooled around with some lengths of leader, fastening them to some of Uncle Birdie's old hooks in the hope of catching a catfish or two.

On both sides of them the land unfolded like the leafing pages of a book and when John turned his eyes to the West Virginia shore he thought: I will be glad when it is dark because he is somewhere over on that shore in one of those towns, along that winding road somewhere, and when it is dark he can't see us. Because he is still hunting and there is only the river between us and those hands. As the warmth of the morning sun filled the air he fell asleep again and Pearl slept, too, cradling the doll, and John dreamed that he was home in his old bed again and Ben Harper was down in the parlour playing his favourite roll on the pianola and Willa was clapping her hands and humming because she did not know the words and it was a thousand years ago.

WHEN he opened his eyes again, all motion was gone. The sun stood high overhead at noon and there were trees between it and his blinking eyes. Pearl, awake before him, had wandered up into the grasses above the steep bank and was gathering a bouquet of daisies. Each saw the woman at the fence at the same moment.

"You two youngsters git up here to me this instant!"

At the authority in this voice, John's mouth fell agape, and Pearl turned a frightened face to his.

"Mind me now! I'll fetch a willow switch and bring you up here *jumpin'* directly!"

The woman was in her middle sixties, staunch and ruddy-faced and big-boned. She wore a man's old hat on her head and a shapeless grey wool sweater hung over her shoulders. Now she snorted like a field hand and snatched a switch of willow as she came scrambling down the bank with the alacrity of a boy. John could not make himself move. The woman had caught Pearl up in her stout embrace now and was making for John, her big shoes squishing through the mud. Pearl, opening her mouth, began to wail; her face wrinkling and scarlet with outrage.

"Don't you hurt her!" cried John, quivering and standing his ground in the skiff bottom.

"Hurt her nothin'!" cried the old woman. "*Wash* her is more like it! And you, too, mister! Now git on up there to my house and don't set a foot inside till I've fetched the washtub for the both of ye." And she herded them grimly before her up through the meadow like angry, little lambs and when she was within earshot of the grey, frame house she began to shout to its inhabitants.

"Ruby! Mary! Clary!"

Above the rows of tomato plants, over the top rail of her neat, white fence, three children's faces appeared, bright as morning hollyhocks. "Yes, Miz Cooper!" they cried in chorus.

"Ruby—run fetch the washtub and fill it. Mary! Clary! Fetch a bar of laundry soap and the scrub brush."

The faces disappeared and Miz Cooper shoved John and Pearl through her gate and then turned to survey them again, her lips pursed and working with anger.

"Gracious! If you hain't a sight to beat all! Where you from? Where's your folks? Speak up now."

John could not find his tongue. He stared at the big, man's shoes on her feet, crusted and heavy with garden mud.

"Gracious! So I've got two more mouths to feed! All right. Git them clothes off now and throw 'em yonder in the grass. Ruby'll wash 'em." Neither child moved. "Mind me now! Mind!"

John slowly began unbuttoning his shirt and the old woman stooped and began tugging at Pearl's knotted shoelaces. The oldest girl, Ruby, bore a washtub to the grass beside the pump and began

filling it with gushing cold water. John listened to the sharp, nasal chant of the pump handle and stared at the washtub. He shivered at the prospect. And yet his heart was curiously warm within him with the unreasonable illusion that he had come home.

IV: *A Strong Tree With Many Birds*

SHE was old and yet she was ageless—in the manner of such staunch country widows. Gaunt, plain-spoken and hard of arm, she could stand up to three of the toughest, shrewdest cattle-dealers in Pleasants County and get every penny she thought her hog was worth. She had a cow and she churned her own butter and sold it at New Economy wrapped in cool, damp swaths of immaculate muslin. She had chickens, and their eggs went to market, too, in a bright yellow basket spread across with a napkin.

Widowed a full forty years before, she had soon grown lonely and so there had never been a time since that her home had not sheltered a child. And children were easy to come by in the river lands. Many a dark-haired farm girl lost her wits to an August moon and a cunning lover and found herself, after he had gone away to work in Pittsburgh or Detroit, with an unwelcome child in her poor mother's kitchen. Once the child was weaned and toddling it was to Rachel Cooper's door that he was carried, like as not, and there was never the bad word uttered for what he was: poor little wood's colt. She fed her children till they were rosy and full, scrubbed them till they were red and squalling, spanked them when there was cause, and taught them the Lord's tales on Sabbath mornings.

At present there were three children: Mary, aged four, with raven-black hair as straight as a mare's tail and eyes like dark little pools of stump water. Clary, eleven and thin as a rail, with the smile of one who had not been smiling long—a thin, aimless child with freckles, crooked teeth and foolish rag-doll eyes. Ruby, thirteen and big and shapeless and stooped from being with the other smaller ones so much and trying always to be down there sharing their world with them. Ruby was Rachel's problem girl. She broke

the preserving jars when Rachel set her to scalding them at canning time; she broke the warm, brown eggs when her big, wooden fingers gathered them; she tripped on full milk pails and sent them splashing. And yet when her hands touched a little child she was transformed and her eyes shone until, like lamps, they illumined the pale, ugly flesh of her face.

This was the house of Rachel Cooper—a strong tree with branches for many birds. So the coming of two more did not make much of a difference. They were children and they were hungry and they needed love and a bath and a spanking and sometimes Rachel would think when she looked at them, any of them: 'Deed to God, sometimes I feel like I'm playin' a big joke on the Lord. Why, when He comes looking for old folks He won't even see me—He'll see them kids and maybe He'll just pass on by and say: Why, shoot! That there's a *mother!* I can't take her!

To John she was a perfect and agonizing enigma: an unfathomable mixture of female authority and tenderest motherliness. He loathed her those first few days and spoke not one single word of answer, or request, or denial to her. Sullenly, stubbornly, the boy submitted to her disquieting scrubbing brush, her fierce, unflagging ministrations to his long-untended hair, her spankings when it came his turn to receive them. And she knew it would be wise to let him be and not try to speak to him too much or to make him answer, knowing that the dark, frightened bird that crouched shivering and hurt in the deep forest of his mind would one day poke its bright eye through the leaves and presently (if she paid no special notice) they would all hear it singing brightly and boldly some afternoon.

Pearl was so hungry for love that she adored Rachel immediately and it was a devotion scarcely less than that she felt towards the girl Ruby. Ruby took complete charge the night the strange new children first slept under Rachel's roof. John rebelled when she attempted to undress him for bed and Rachel intervened, but it was Ruby who held Pearl in her arms until she was asleep. John lay awake beside his sister that first night, in the old spool bed in Rachel's attic room, in a perfect agony of misgiving. And yet in

the time to come, as the days stretched into weeks and the weeks wound like country lanes among the shaking, burning leaves of Indian summer, it seemed to John that what he had felt that morning on the sand bar when old Rachel had come upon them there, that sense of coming home, might be true.

One night they were all at the black stove making sea-foam candy: old Rachel and the girls prattling and carrying on over the buttered tins where the candy pieces were to be spread to cool. He sat apart from them, alone on the back stoop in the crisp air, under the moon. He had almost thought for a moment that he would like to go indoors and stand close to them, not to say anything because he could not speak yet, but just to stand, to be one of them, perhaps to touch the old woman with his hand.

On the night when Rachel read to them from the Bible about Moses he had been moved even more. "Now, old Pharaoh—he was the King of Egyptland!" she cried, spreading her hard, old hands across the tissue-thin pages of the Scripture. "And he had a daughter and once upon a time she was walkin' along the river and she seen something bumpin' and scrapin' along down on a bar under the willows, back in the cat-tails. Well now, it was a skiff washed up on the bar. And who do you reckon was in it?"

"Pearl and John!" cried poor, big Ruby.

"Not this time!" cried Rachel. "It was just one youngin—a little boy babe. It was Moses!—a king of men, Moses, that was to grow up to lead his people out of the wilderness—to save them all from death and pestilence and plague."

John heard it and came to them that night, drawn irresistibly by this tale that was so completely his own, and sat boldly in the circle, beside Ruby's carpet stool, and listened some more and the old woman wisely paid him no mind.

The river brought the time of gold into the valley. Up in the woods the hickory nuts rained their dry patter throughout the still afternoons and there was smoke in the air. John had come home. The dark bird was freed and had flown into the sun. All the love of that house had been too much for him: it was in the smell of the clean clothes that Rachel patched and sewed, in the odour of

fresh bread on autumn afternoons and in the nasal, hearty crackle of her impatient voice when she hailed them in for supper. And yet despite this capitulation John kept his eyes on the river road, and guarded the doll in his sister's arms with unremitting vigilance; harking ever for the clop of the hunter's horse on the windy, midnight road, for a creak upon the threshold.

One night, sensing that he might want to talk, Rachel sent the other children off to bed but kept John with her in the kitchen. She bent her head, squinting through her poor, taped-up, crazed spectacles at her darning under the golden circle of lamplight. "John, where's your folks?" she said suddenly.

He lifted his eyes to her and said the word plainly, knowing its awful truth. "Dead."

"Dead," she nodded with finality and let that matter be. "And where you from?"

"Up river," he said. "A ways."

"Well, I know that, John! I didn't figger you'd rowed that boat up from Parkersburg! Have you any kin—aunts, uncles, grand-folks?"

"I don't know," he said. And suddenly, and with a tenderness that nigh broke the old woman's heart, John reached out his hand and laid his fingers on her old knuckles.

"Tell me that story agin. About them Kings. That the Queen found down on a sand bar in a skiff that time."

"Kings!" she said. "Why, honey, there was only one."

"Oh no," he said. "I mind you said there was two."

"Well, shoot! Maybe there was! Yes, come to think of it—there was two, John." And she fetched the old Bible and read him the tale again, in a gruff voice because she did not dare let him see how she felt just then, and changed the story round so that there were really two in the bulrushes, in the basket.

"Git to bed now!" she cried at last, rising with moist eyes. "Gracious, it's nigh eight o'clock and we've all got to be up to-morrow bright and early to fetch them eggs and butter to town."

He lay in bed that night and he thought for the first time: Well, maybe he won't come at all now and maybe it wasn't none

of it real and maybe there wasn't even any Mom or Dad or none of it and I am a lost King and Pearl is a lost King, too.

THE TRIP by ferryboat across the river to New Economy with the week's butter and eggs was the great event towards which each of the six other days of the week moved. In New Economy they had a good restaurant meal at the Empire Eats and when the day's trading was done, Rachel would take them to Ev Roberts' pharmacy and treat them all to an enormous, communal sack of licorice drops and sometimes ice-cream sodas. People turned on the streets to stare after Rachel Cooper and her brood.

"Hi, Miz Cooper."

"Howdy, Macijah."

"Got two more peeps in your brood, I see."

"Yes, and ornerier than the rest!" she cried. "Don't kids just beat the Dutch now! I'll swear I scrubbed them two till they was raw 'fore I come over here this mornin'."

"Where'd ye git them new ones, Miz Cooper?"

"Driftwood!" she cried. "Just driftwood warshed up on a bar!" And then she could have cut her tongue out for saying that: for letting anyone know anything about those two. Nine chances out of ten that boy John had fibbed to her about having no folks and next thing she knew some family would come rattling up the yard in a busted-down truck and claim their two lost biddies and light into Rachel for kidnapping them in the first place. Sure as sin, some father would show his face in town and the gossips would tell. And sure as sin he would come a-hunting his kids.

As a matter of fact, it was not three days later that the stranger with the funny hands bought Ruby an ice-cream soda and a love-story magazine in Ev Roberts' pharmacy and told her what pretty eyes she had.

RACHEL had arranged for Ruby to learn sewing from Granny Blankensop—an aged, widowed seamstress who lived with her daughter across the river at New Economy. Each Thursday even-

ing Rachel tied up a fifty-cent piece in the girl's handkerchief and gave her two dozen eggs' tuition in a yellow basket. Then she took her to the ferry landing and saw her safely on board the little boat which was to be met on the Ohio side by Granny Blankensop's middle-aged and unmarried daughter Nevada. At nine Rachel would come back to the landing to meet the girl. This procedure was intended to avoid a disastrous encounter between Ruby and any of the ornery loafers who lounged on the bench in front of Ev Roberts' drug-store.

Yet, one Thursday night when Nevada was to meet Ruby at the New Economy landing she was, in fact, overcome in her bedroom after two tumblers of her mother's dandelion wine. And so Ruby had stood in bewilderment on the alien bricks and pondered what she was supposed to do next. Through the branches of the chestnut trees along Water Street she saw the bright lights of New Economy. She heard the drifting, random sounds of men's easy voices and the music of a radio. Finally she decided to go to Ev Roberts' pharmacy and look at the love-story magazines.

"That's her right yonder!" whispered Macijah Blake to the stranger, nudging him and pointing to the girl coming down the street. "That's Ruby and I reckon she'd be able to tell you what you want to know about them two new ones Rachel Cooper took in here a while back!" The stranger had appeared in New Economy that afternoon and hitched his horse to the iron courthouse fence. At dusk he had sought out the evening loafers and told them the story that he had repeated in a hundred dusty cross-road gatherings until he could say it now by rote: how he was a preacher of the Gospel looking for his no-account wife who had run off with a drummer and how his two blessed children had got lost in the scuffle. A little boy and a girl with a doll? Yes, thought Macijah Blake, that was them. But Ruby would know for sure and he pointed Ruby out as she came towards the drug-store.

"You're Ruby—ain't you, my child?"

He itched her curiosity. His eyes were strange. He was handsome and old and cruel-looking, like Herod.

"Ruby, I'd like to talk to you, my dear."

"Will you buy me a chocolate soda?"

"I want to ask you a question, girl. And if you'll answer me God's truth I'll buy you whatever you want."

"A chocolate soda," she repeated, and he took her into the drug-store and Ev Roberts' nephew waited on them and while Preacher watched her, seething with impatience, she began to eat.

"Now it's time for you to keep your share of the bargain," he said. "Will you tell me——?" But without answering she slid from the wire chair at the table and wandered off to the magazine rack and leafed through a new love-story magazine.

"Will you tell me?"

"Buy me this?" she smiled, her small eyes shrewd and bargaining, and he cried: "All right! All right!" and went to lay the money on the marble and came back to her side, waiting, glaring at her with choking impatience.

"Ain't I purty?" she said suddenly.

And he smiled and relaxed then, knowing how he could get her.

"Why, you're the purtiest gal I've seen in all my wandering! 'Deed, I never seen such purty eyes in all my born days! Didn't no one never tell you that, Ruby?"

"No," she breathed. "No one never did."

And then she danced over to the big brown mirror over the soda fountain and grimaced coquettishly at the image behind it. He came and brought her back to the table and made her sit and finish the soda while he told her some more about her pretty eyes, and when the soda was gone he made her give him the magazine until she had kept her share of the bargain.

"Two little youngins," he said. "There's two new ones over at your place, ain't there, Ruby?" She nodded dumbly.

"What's their names?" he whispered, bending closer.

"Pearl and John."

"Ahhh! And when did they come to live at your house?"

"This summer."

"And is there—a doll? Is there a doll anywhere that either of them——"

"Pearl," she said. "She has a doll. Only she won't never let me

play with it. She won't let none of us kids play with it."

"Ahhh! Yes! Now not a word about this little pow-wow to Miz Cooper, eh? That's part of the bargain. Eh?"

And she smiled and nodded and he gave her the magazine again, and she thought: He is wonderful!

AFTER Rachel found the magazine under Ruby's skirts that night she took it from her. Ruby sat on the straight-backed chair by the kitchen door and wept soundlessly into her big fingers. After a while she took her hands away from her face and let the great tears squeeze slowly from her quivering lids. Rachel sat opposite her on the canning bench, scowling at the girl in troubled speculation. "Ruby, stop your weepin' and look me square in the eye and answer me. Ruby, you didn't have no money to buy that love-story book, did ye?"

"No'm. But I never took nothin' from your sugar bowl. Miz Cooper, you just know I wouldn't steal nothin' of yours."

"Now I know you wouldn't, child. I'm not accusin' you of nothin'. Just tell me the truth. Where'd you git the money to git that there book?"

"He give it to me," she babbled. "He said——"

"Who?"

"The man down at the drug-store!"

"I see. You was at the drug-store. And this here man——"

"He was a nice man," said the girl. "He said my eyes was the purtiest things."

"Pshaw now! And who ever said they warn't!"

"He bought me a sody and the book and he said my eyes was the purtiest——"

"But he must have wanted something, Ruby. A man don't waste his time on a girl unless he gits something. What——"

"He asked about John—and Pearl."

And Rachel thought: And so it has come as it has come before. Sooner or later they come back for them and take them away and it's just like they was to take and cut a piece off me.

"Is he their Pap?"

Ruby shrugged.

"Well, girl, didn't he say?"

"No'm. He just said was them kids Pearl and John livin' here."

Rachel arose, livid with anger, biting her tongue with it. "Then I'd just like to know why he never come right up to the house today and showed hisself!" she cried. "Just come right up like ever one else does in broad daylight and said, Them's my youngins! Much obliged, madam! Hand 'em over! Shoot! I just plainly can't abide a sneak! What else did you tell him?"

"I said they come to live with us last summer."

"All right. And then what did he say?"

Ruby squinted and stuck her tongue out with a pathetic try at shrewdness, trying to remember how it had been.

"I forgit," she said, scratching her head slowly.

Rachel glared out of the open window into the black night of autumn. "He'll come a-callin' soon enough," she mumbled, hugging her breast and rocking gently and thinking: "All the love and worry and fretting like they was my own. I just wonder if they know what a chunk they're cutting out of me when they come for them at last."

"Fool!" she scolded herself out loud. "Derned old fool!"

IT WAS Ruby who saw the man on the horse first and dropped two brown eggs splattering on the flagstones by the stable. He rode slowly up the path through the meadow from the river road and Ruby scampered off to the basement to get Rachel.

"It's him! The man! The man!"

"Well, shoot! Don't take on like it was the Second Coming, Ruby. Git on up to the kitchen and put your shoes on. I'll be up and talk with him directly."

He tethered his horse to a fence post and walked across the yard towards the back porch, his head cocked slightly, his eyes creased in cautious greeting. "Mornin', ladies."

"How'do!"

"You're Miz Cooper, I take it."

"I am."

"Then you're who I'm lookin' for all right, ma'am."

"It's about them two kids I took in. That John and that Pearl?"

His face twitched with emotion then and his voice broke in great, thankful sobs. "My little lambs!" he cried, falling to his knees near the feet of the transfixed Ruby. "Oh sweet, sweet little lambs! And to think I never hoped to see them again in this world! Oh, dear madam, if you was to know what travail—what a thorny crown I have borne in my search for these strayed chicks! Oh, where are they, Miz Cooper? Where are my little lambs?"

"They've all went to gather black walnuts," she said. "My other two girls Mary and Clary's with them."

She fixed him with a stare, and she thought: It's all right for him to come for them if they is his own but there is something wrong here. There is nothing I can guess by looking at him but there is something I can feel in my bones, in my skin, in my hair, that is wrong. It is just like I can feel in my arches the thunder and rain comin'. "Ruby," she said. "Go call them kids!"

Preacher wiped at the tears on his loose, leathery cheeks with the heel of his hand. That was when Rachel saw the letters of the HATE tattoo and shivered and the old mother-wit warnings raced and chattered like scared mice in the dark cupboards of her mind. He caught her staring and immediately began explaining. She listened, unmoved, as his rising voice described the war of good and evil in the human heart and his knuckles cracked and squeaked as the hands met and the fingers twined and strove together. "I am a man of God," he said at last.

"And them kids," she said, "is yours?"

"My flesh and blood!" he said. "My very heart and soul!"

"Where's your missus?"

He bowed his head and bit his lip. "She went the way of temptation," he whispered. "Run off with a drummer one Wednesday night not an hour before I was to preach the prayer meetin'."

"And took them kids with her? That's strange! If she took them, then how come——"

"Yes," he said. "Took them with her. God only knows what

unholy sights and sounds those innocent little babes has heard in the dens of perdition where she dragged them! But at last it was too much for them. They run off from her——”

“Where’d they run from? I mean, where’d you figure the woman took them when she run away from you?”

“Somewhere down river!” he said, shaking his head grimly. “Parkersburg, mebbe! Cincinnati!”

Rachel rocked fast and hard, her eyes twinkling and strong in her face. “Right funny, hain’t it,” she said, “how they rowed all the way up river in a ten-foot boat!”

Preacher’s eyes flashed like summer heat lightning before the night storm. “They run north,” he said. “I been follerin’ them all summer long. I reckon they stole the skiff and coasted down river a spell to keep off the hot roads. And now tell me about them! Are they well?”

“They’re a sight better than they was when I fetched them up from that mud bank where the river had throwed ’em. They was a sight to turn a body’s stomach. Just skin and bones, and hungry as hogs.”

“Gracious gracious! You are a good woman, Miz Cooper! I don’t reckon they had nothin’ in the way of worldly possessions—except the clothes on their backs?”

“Not much more!” snapped Rachel. “And *they’d* hardly stand another washin’.”

He eyed her again swiftly; the glance moving in a quick, feathering appraisal like the forked tongue of a copperhead. “That little Pearl!” he crowed softly. “Her and that doll of hers! Kept it with her night and day!”

“She still does,” said Rachel.

And suddenly the children rounded the corner of the wash-house in a pell-mell rush of small faces.

“John, Pearl,” said Rachel, rising. “We got company today. Your Dad has come to claim you.”

For an instant none of them spoke, none moved. The group seemed frozen like figures in a tin-type. Then Pearl gave a wail of happiness and, dropping the doll in the grass by John’s feet, raced

to Preacher's arms. He caught her up and kissed her and his face was twisting again in sorrowful happiness. John stood still and looked straight into the old woman's eyes. And in that instant neither spoke and yet each told the other a thousand things, Rachel's eyes holding his and saying: What is it, John? What is wrong about all of it? And then she read the dark and awful answer in his eyes. John lowered his eyes from hers then and stared at the doll at his feet. He stooped bravely and gathered it up, its loose, silly arms flopping against him. Preacher peered over Pearl's shoulder at him.

"And there's little John! Ah, what a day this is! What rejoicing there must be in Heaven just now! Come to me, boy!"

But John did not move. Rachel's mouth was a slit, her arms folded tight against her gingham bosom, her eyes watching Preacher. "What's wrong, John?" she said.

"He ain't my Dad," John said, and hugged the doll.

Preacher's smile was still there as he came towards the boy and then Rachel moved between them and stood, thinking: And he ain't no preacher neither because I have seen preachers in my day and some was saints on earth and some was crooked as a dog's hind leg but this one has got them all beat for badness.

"John! Have a heart! You'll have poor Miz Cooper here thinkin' I'm an impostor directly. Pearl, tell Miz Cooper who I am."

Pearl dimpled in a smile for them all. "You're Daddy," she said.

Preacher turned to Rachel again. "There now. You see? The boy's a strange lad. The shock of all this—the mother runnin' away and all—he's a little *queer*."

"Not so's a body would notice," snapped Rachel. "Not so queer as some I've seen today."

"Miz Cooper, you don't mean to hint you believe this boy!"

"I know him!" cried Rachel. "A damned sight better than I know you, mister!"

The lights were there now, plain to see: the flickering fire rising behind his veiled, dark eyes. His whole face began to sag suddenly, the smile gone; the whole mask of flesh melting quickly into a sallow leer of unveiled malevolence. "Well, they believed me

in town. And they'd understand it wasn't my fault if there's going to be any trouble about gettin' them kids back."

Old Rachel ducked inside the washhouse and John was alone as Preacher moved swiftly towards him. Soundlessly, John scrambled under the low foundations of the washhouse.

"Don't this beat all now!" Preacher cried. "A loving father come to claim his little lost lambs and one of 'em actin' up this way. Well, I reckon I'll just have to peel off my coat and scramble in there after him myself."

Old Rachel loomed above him then on the stone threshold: the blue barrel of the pump gun was steady as doom in her old hands.

"Just march yourself yonder to your horse, mister."

Preacher, on all fours, lifted his face slowly to the gun muzzle and then to Rachel's face. His features were yellow with it now: the raging, uncontrollable fury. He staggered to his feet and she saw then that he had the knife open in the palm of his hand, had had it out even as he started under the washhouse after John. Now he backed away from her, bouncing it lightly in his palm, the froth seemed to have gathered on his lips even before he started screaming at her; moving stiffly backward step by step, the bone-handled thing with its bright, winking blade still bouncing in his palm, his whole face suddenly going to pieces in a wash of madness. "Damn you! Damn you, I'm going! Yes, I'm going but I'll come back! I'll have that little beast yet! Damn you, I will! You ain't done with Harry Powell yet!"

His whole body was racked with spasms of maniacal rage, the face a wrinkled mask of murder, the knife still bouncing like a carnival toy in his open palm. He led the horse away, shaking too badly to mount it, and Rachel followed with the gun to the fence with all her little flock behind her, except for the still-hidden John.

The voice roared across the silent fields: "You'll wish you had never been born when I am done with you! I'll come back when it's dark! You devils! You wait! Just wait!"

When dusk fell Rachel lit all the lamps downstairs and gathered all her lambs about her in the kitchen and sat with the shotgun across her knees, facing the night in the window. It was dark



for only a few moments before the full moon appeared and lit the mists of early evening. They could see him quite distinctly from the kitchen window: sitting on a locust stump at the end of Rachel's garden, his whole body malevolently concentrated and fixed upon the silent farmhouse. Preacher's siege had begun. Rachel sent the whimpering Ruby off to put the children to bed. John's eyes shone with an unflinching confidence that Rachel would save them. Incredibly, he slept.

The moon shone down on the field, and against the pale luminescence of the mists the old woman fixed her smarting, weary eyes on the black shape of the hunter, thinking: Dear God, there is something awful out there and I've got to keep it from my lambs. Dear God, don't let me sleep.

IT SEEMED that her head had fallen only for a second. And yet when her eyes flew open again the moon had moved from the crooked elbow of the apple tree and swam free in the thin mists above the stable. The black figure was gone from the end of the garden. And the old

woman thought in the first moment of real fear she had known : He is closer now, sneaking in towards the house like a fox with its belly dragging in the corn furrows. When the hoarse hall clock chimed three she gasped for breath and thought : I had better fetch them all downstairs and we will stay here together by the stove till morning. Because I was a fool and fell asleep for a spell and even now if he was to get to the house I wouldn't know it. She took the lamp to the doorway at the foot of the kitchen stairs and held it into the darkness.

"Ahhhh, Ruby! Ahh, Ruby!"

"Yes'm?"

"Ruby, git John and Pearl up out of bed. Git Clary and Mary up, too. Bring them all down here to the kitchen."

And she turned again and the long shadows stretched like arms before the moving lamp as she came back to the table and sat down again with the pump gun. The children padded swiftly into the kitchen and circled her, wide-awake and frightened and waiting for Rachel to tell them what to do. And looking into their round child faces she saw all the trust that was there and bit her tongue with hot, choking rage at the man in the mists.

"Children, I got lonesome and wanted company. I figgered we might play games. Ruby, run put the coffee-pot on. I reckon a drop of good, strong coffee would do us all some good."

John had spoken no word since coming into the kitchen. His eyes, fixed now on the night beyond the window screen, saw now another night by the wharf and his ears heard again the heels of the hunter ringing clear on the bricks of Peacock Alley in that hour when he and Pearl had fled the world. A moth thudded against the screen then and Rachel bit her tongue to keep from crying out and she said loudly : "All right! Who'll tell a story?"

"You!" they cried unanimously. "You tell a story!"

So Rachel told them Bible stories. And she listened to the ticking house and thought : I must keep talking and keep them listening because that will keep us from thinking about him. Because he is out there and he is closer now. I can smell him like I

can smell burning brush in October even when there ain't no smoke on the sky to mark it.

It would have seemed the simplest matter in the world to go to the phone on the hall wall and crank till Miz Booher answered and tell her to get the State Troopers up here quick from Parkersburg. And yet this was the last thing that would have entered Rachel Cooper's mind. She had a deep bottom-lands mistrust of civil law. If there was trouble at hand it could most always be settled by the showing of a gun muzzle and a few strong words.

A gentle, steady wind rose from the river and the mists began clearing and the moon shone bright as twilight. And Rachel thought: Now, if I was to blow out the kitchen lamp I could see it all clearer: the whole of my farm from the barn down to the road and the river beyond it. "I sure could tell stories better," she exclaimed to the children, "if we was to blow the lamp out! It's always more fun hearin' stories in the dark, ain't it now?"

"Yes!" they cried, shivering with excitement at this night game Rachel was playing. "Yes, blow out the lamp!"

So she cupped her palm against the smoking chimney and huffed once and suddenly the moonlight came pouring over the window sills in blue pools at their feet. "Little Mary!" she cried cheerfully. "Let's hear you do the Twenty-third Psalm again. You and me has 'bout got that one learnt, ain't we?"

Little Mary shut both eyes squint-tight and began lisping the words Rachel had patiently taught her.

"—He 'storeth my soul. He lea'th me in the paths in righteousness. For He—for He name's sake. He——"

And the old woman's mouth shaped the words mutely with the child's voice because when you live for fifty years in a house you know every sound it is capable of making, and Rachel knew that the faint, soft outcry of the floor-board by the marble-top table far away in the parlour was a sound that never happened unless a foot was there, pressing it. Yes, she thought, he has come in through the west parlour window that I forgot to latch last Wednesday when I aired the room. Yes, he is in the house with us now and I dasn't get up to go to the stove for a match to light the lamp again

because I don't know how close he is.

In the long, ugly pier glass in the hallway outside the kitchen door she could see mirrored the dusty square of moon on the dining-room floor and thought: When he comes through yonder archway I will see him no matter how softly he walks and that's when I'll start pulling this trigger. "Come, lambs!" she whispered sharply. "Come stand close by me! Mind now!"

Again it might have been Rachel's imagination: the tricks of an old woman's ears: that sound in the room of breathing that was not hers nor the children's. And she turned her eyes cautiously just as he spoke distinctly from the far end of the kitchen.

"Figgered I was gone, eh?"

Rachel swung the heavy gun, ready to start pulling the trigger as soon as she was sure where the voice was; hard and steady and angry as a man would have been, and thinking: He's right yonder there behind the spice closet. He come in from the dining-room on his hand and knees so's I wouldn't spot him in the pier glass.

"What do you want?" she said, in a high, steady voice.

"Them kids!"

"Yes," she said. "I reckon so. But there's more to it than that, mister. There's somethin' them kids know—somethin' they seen once! What are you after them for, you devil?"

"None of your damned business, madam!"

She ducked her face, whispering among the little faces for an instant. "Run hide in the staircase yonder! Run, quick!"

And there was a quick shuffle of naked feet as they obeyed. Now Rachel stood alone in the pale arena, the gun level in the crook of her arm.

"Mister, I'm givin' you to the count of three to git out that screen door yonder. And if you ain't gone by then I'm comin' across this kitchen a-shootin' and I'll blast every winder and joist out of that end of the kitchen and you with it to Kingdom Come!"

Silence. And the prickle and gather quickened in her flesh and even as she shaped her mouth for the count she sensed a motion at her feet and she knew suddenly that he had stolen that close in that space of seconds. And now he rocketed suddenly upwards

before her very eyes, his twisted mask caught for one split second in the silver moonlight and she saw the knife in his fist rise swiftly as the bobbin of a sewing machine just as she began pulling the trigger while the gun bucked and boomed in her hands. After the scream and the thunder, the room rang with echoing stillness and she saw him reel backward on to the threshold, screaming and cursing, then stumble into the broken shadow and light beneath the apple tree in the yard and up the rough ground towards the open barn. The children in the dark of the staircase had crouched in mute horror throughout all of it and now they listened as they heard Rachel move into the hallway and crank the wall phone and wait. They heard her tell Miz Booher that she had better send to Parkersburg for the State Troopers and get them out to her place right quick for she had trapped something up in her barn. Then she shuffled out into the yard to the rocker beneath the tree where she would begin the moonlight vigil before the barn door where the black figure had disappeared.

WHEN the sun broke clean over the Ohio hills, Rachel heard the cars in the lane and the voices of the men. And the sleeping children heard them, too, and awoke. They went with her to the fence and saw the men in the tan state-police uniforms and the blue-coated city police from Parkersburg. Her hand was wound round John's cold fingers and when Preacher suddenly came staggering out of the barn she felt sweat spring in the boy's palm and heard the quick intake of his breath as the blue men stole in from the river mists and gathered under the branches of the apple tree.

Now they moved together towards the man in the barnyard who did not now seem to see them or care if they came or not. Rachel, towering above her huddled, little flock, could not see the boy's face but heard the hiccuping whimper in his throat as he watched the blue men move solemnly towards the swaying man—Preacher, his left arm hanging useless in his shattered sleeve.

"Harry Powell! You're under arrest for the murder of Willa Harper!"

And John thought: It is them again and it is him and it is hap-

pening all over again, or maybe this is it happening for the first time and it was only something I dreamed that time before. Now he is falling down in the grass. Yes, this is it. Yes, directly the little paper bag with the presents will fall out of his pocket and Yes! Yes! now they will drag him away! "John! John, wait!" Rachel cried. But he was gone with the doll Jenny, torn from his sister's arms, and he held it out in front of him as he ran towards them. Even the blue men fell back when he came hurtling among them and arched above the man in the grass, his child's face twisted and clenched like a fist.

"Here! Here!" he screamed, flogging the man in the grass with the limp doll. "Here! Take it back! I can't stand it, Dad! It's too much, Dad! I can't stand it! Here! I don't want it! Here! Here!"

Then the blue men seized him gently and one of them carried him back to the yard, limp and sobbing, and when, at last, they had carried Preacher off to the cars, old Rachel bore the boy upstairs to her own big feather bed and undressed him and kissed his face and tucked him in—little and naked and lost—under the old gospel quilt that she had made when she was a girl in the mountains sixty years before.

JOHN thought: They keep asking me to remember all kinds of stuff. They don't know it was a dream and when you tell about a dream it is not all there the way they want it to be. They ask me the questions and all the people look at me.

I had a dream once but you can't remember all the stuff in dreams and so when I start to tell them a little part of it the rest all goes away. When I look down there at the people all I can see is Miz Cooper and Pearl and that new doll baby of hers and Ruby and Little Mary and Clary and all I want to do is go home because it is nearly Christmas.

The blue men came. I remember that part of the dream. And they took him away and they have him shut up in a big stone house up the street from Miz Cooper's sister's house. One day last week Miz Cooper taken us on the train to Moundsville for this here trial is what they call it. We are going to live with Miz

Cooper's sister Lovey until the trial is finished and then we will go home again because it is nearly Christmas.

I can't much figure out what any of it is about except that this fellow keeps saying something about Bluebird. It seems like this Bluebird had twenty-five wives and he killed every last one of them and they been hunting him now for months and months and now they got him.

Pearl talks a lot when the men ask her questions. They sit down in the chair and take Pearl on their lap and talk to her real low and friendly-like and Pearl tells them all kinds of crazy stuff. Miz Cooper she talked lots, too, and somebody named Icey and a man named Walt stood up in the back of the crowd yesterday afternoon and started screaming and hollering: "Lynch him! Lynch him! This court won't never see justice done to the Bluebird monster! For he lied and he taken the Lord's name in vain and he trampled on His Holy Book!"

There is this big store across from the courthouse with a toy dog in the window and they have a big Victrola inside and a great big Victrola record hanging out over the doorway and every time you walk past you can hear this feller singing and playing the guitar. It's always the song that goes:

Oh come and hear my story,
My tale of blood and gore!
'Twas down at Cresap's Landing
Along the river shore!

Whenever Miz Cooper walks us past this store there is a bunch of fellers and women standing out in front listening to that song with their faces all kind of serious and crazy-like. And we just walk along and don't pay no mind but I can still hear this feller singing and the next part of the song goes:

'Twas there in Marshall County
That rainy April day!
When Bluebird Powell found her
His weak and helpless prey!

A WINTER dusk. "Ruby?"

"Yes'm."

"Run down to the little store across from the jail and fetch back a pound of butter. I clean forgot when we shopped today and Lovey's 'bout got supper ready. Here's fifty cents."

Ruby pulls on the old coat, far too small for her, and the ugly toboggan cap that barely covers her shaggy hair. She moves into the crystal silence of the winter dusk, down the pavement, the coin clutched in her palm, the wind drifting sharp as a razor.

The blue men, Ruby thinks. John said it was them that has got him up there in that big stone house yonder. I reckon they won't let him out or else he would have come to see us again and maybe he would have told me again about my purty eyes. I like him because—nobody else really loves me. Miz Cooper and them kids—I love them, I reckon, but shoot! she treats me like them and they are babies. I am so big and tall I don't fit things any more. Rooms don't fit. People don't fit neither. Except him. He don't make fun of me and treat me like a baby.

She stood still when she heard a sound like a vast thunder in the town and her face screwed up, straining to fathom its meaning and wondering: Them's people shouting somewheres. All them people away off somewheres. This sure is the strangest town.

And then she saw the small bright flames and thought: Why, that is fire on the end of those sticks the people are waving: that crowd that is marching up the street from the Court House.

They were walking slowly towards the jail and it seemed, curiously, as if their faces were not moving as slowly as their bodies were, as if, indeed, the faces were being propelled swiftly before them by the leaping light of the red torches. Now they were almost abreast of her in the middle of Tomlinson Avenue and she could see their faces more clearly and with a particular vividness the face of the big man in the lead. There were blue men with guns gathering on the jailhouse steps, but the men with torches did not stop. She began to run, to catch up with them, and then one of them turned and gave her a shove and told her to go home, it wasn't any job for children. She stood there a moment

watching with her dream eyes as the seething mob circled and moved in cautiously towards the porch where the blue men were knotted. Then she turned quickly to run back to Lovey's house while behind her the breaking, hoarse voice of Walt Spoon rose above the gathering chorus of the mob.

"Because he tricked us! Because he tricked us! Because he is Satan hiding behind the Cross!"

And the mob roared its affirmation and moved up the steps and Ruby ran into the house and old Rachel met her in the hall by saying: "Why, where's the butter? For evermore, Ruby, where you been?"

V: *They Abide*

CHRISTMAS came to blanket the black memories for a while: Christmas with a swirling two-day snowfall with flakes as big as summer cabbage moths. And now they were all home again, inside the warm, familiar house: old Rachel and her flock. She had been glad to come home from Lovey's, as much for being under her own roof again as for fleeing the scene of Preacher's last, terrible night on earth.

She had bought a Christmas present for each of the children and for the season she baked a fruit cake and killed two fine fat Plymouth Rocks and opened preserving jars of the special holiday things she kept on the dusty cellar shelves. These were days when John had begun to smile again and had ceased to sit apart, when Ruby and Clary and Rachel fetched down a greasy old deck of cards and played Hearts together on the kitchen table.

Christmas made Rachel angry. It made her think again of what the world does to children. If one listened well upon any night in history one might hear the running of their feet: the little children for whom there was no welcome door. Old Rachel banged pots and baking pans in her kitchen those bustling days before the Yule season, muttering to herself and scowling out of her windows, angry at how it was with some child somewhere in the world that very winter day. On the afternoon before Christmas

Day she had gone down through the snow of the path to the road. When she saw that there was no mail in the box she grumbled again to herself. Now she knew for sure there would be neither card nor package this year from her own son Ralph and his wife who lived in Chillicothe and she thought: Good! I'm glad they didn't send me nothing. Whenever they do it's never nothing I want nor need but something to show me how fancy and smart they've come up in the world.

And she laboured back up the frozen ruts through the knee-deep snow, an old woman like a strong tree with branches for many birds, and bit her tongue with disgust at herself for being hurt, for caring that Ralph had sent nothing this year. Then the door to the kitchen opened under her hand and she heard Ruby and Pearl whispering and giggling somewhere in the house as they wrapped the pot-holders they had crocheted her for Christmas gifts. Rachel shook herself angrily, more piqued than ever with herself, thinking: I ought to be ashamed. 'Deed now! Caring about a fool thing like that! Why, *these* is my kids! A brand-new harvest! These kids is all that matters.

She poured herself a sputtering-hot cup of black coffee and reflected about children. One would think the world might be ashamed to name such a day for one of them and then go on the same old way: children running the lanes, lost sheep crying in the wind. Lord save little children! Because with every child ever born of woman there is a time of running through a shadowed place, an alley with no doors, and a hunter whose footsteps ring brightly along the bricks behind him. With every child—rich or poor—there is this time of echoing and vast aloneness, when there is no one to come nor to hear, and dry leaves scurrying past along a street become the rustle of Dread and the ticking of the old house is the cocking of the hunter's gun. To Rachel the most moving thing of all had been her lifelong witnessing of the humbling grace with which these small ones accept their lot. Lord save little children! They would weep at a broken toy but stand with the courage of a burning saint before the murder of a mother. The death of a kitten would send them screaming to the handiest

female lap and yet when the time came that they were no longer welcome in a house, they would gather their things together in old paper cartons tied with lengths of clothes-line and wander forth to seek another street, another door. Lord save little children! For each of them has his Preacher to hound him down the dark river of fear. Each one is mute and alone because there is no word for a child's fear and no ear to heed it if there were a word and no one to understand it if it were heard. Lord save little children! They abide and they endure.

After supper that Christmas eve the children gathered round Rachel at the kitchen table and she told them the Christmas story and little Mary said: "Can we give you presents now?"

"Shoot!" Rachel said. "You don't mean to say you got me a present?"

"Oh, yes!" they cried, and she chuckled and scolded herself for caring so much for them because one of these fine mornings the kinsmen would come to claim them or some fool county woman with a brief case and a head full of college words. And she stood waiting while they clamoured away into the house after the messy little packages they had wrapped for her and when they returned they stood gravely holding them out for her to take. There were hand-made pot-holders from each of the girls and though Rachel had helped them make them every step of the way she pretended now to be enormously surprised and pleased as a queen would be with kerchiefs of mandarin silk. Yet John had no gift half so fine as these bright, ragged pot-holders. His gift was a large McIntosh apple which he had taken from the barrel in the cellar and wrapped himself and prayed that she would not guess that it was not something for which he had paid a great sum of money in a rare and exotic market place. This, to be sure, was what Rachel pretended to believe and John smiled at her cry of surprise and then it was her turn and she gave them the packages which she had kept hidden in the top of the china closet. There were new calico dresses for the girls and sticks of peppermint candy for all and for John there was the dollar watch that he had wanted since that time long ago when he had seen one through the dust of



Miz Cunningham's dreadful little rag-bag window. The girls ran screaming now to the upstairs rooms to try their dresses on and Rachel, submitting at last to the spirit of the season, sat down smiling at the kitchen table. John had gone off behind the stairs and stood listening to the watch in the pocket of his shirt, its proud and magic heart beating against his own, its numerals shining in the dark of the pocket. Rachel's eyes twinkled in his direction.

"I declare, John! That watch sure is a fine, loud ticker!"

He cast her a swift look and then could not hold back the wide, proud smile though still he could not find a word to say that would be just right.

"My! It sure will be nice," she cried, "to have someone round

the house who can give me the right time of day! That old Seth Thomas in the hall just ain't what it was once upon a time."

And then he waited until she stopped looking, until she seemed busy again with her mending and then he walked softly to her, standing very quiet, hoping she would not notice him, because if he might be allowed to stand there unseen for an instant then there would just be the two of them, and then he might find the words to speak his heart. And Rachel paid him no mind, frowning and pursing her lips, and then bit off the yarn and that was when John reached out his hand and touched her shoulder.

"That there watch," he said, "is the nicest watch I ever had."

"Well, good!" she said. "I'm mighty glad to hear that! A feller can't just go around with run-down, busted watches in his pocket! Especially when folks is countin' on him for the right time of day!"

So he went away again and stayed for a while in the pitch-dark parlour, among the white spectres of the muslin-cloaked furniture, and stared at the little glowing numerals that winked and burned softly like the eyes of golden mice.

In the kitchen he could hear Rachel hollering about how pretty Ruby and the rest of them all looked in their new dresses and directly she yelled for him to come, that it was time they all got to their beds. But there was no sleep for John for a long, ticking time that night. Crouched beneath the bright, heaped quilts he stared at the watch; watching the circuit of the creeping golden hands until they marked the passing of an hour. Pearl hunched warm and sleeping beside him. And John lay listening to the faint, bright ticking and then he heeded some secret and forgotten bidding of his memory and looked at the place where, on the flowered wallpaper of the bedroom, the moon cast its square of pale light through the window pane. The branches of the apple tree shook their naked, winter fingers in the gusts of harsh wind from the river. And in that new, pale proscenium of light John saw again the dancers, the black horse prancing and the brave little soldier and the clown with his toothpick legs. And yet something else awaited its cue in the wings of that arena: the

shape of a man who had stood there in a lost time long ago. Silently John slipped from beneath the covers into the icy air and stole shivering across the cold floor to the window sill. Then he saw that the black shape had, indeed, returned, standing as it had before, as he had known it would be. John lifted an arm and the spectre did the same. He twisted his body that way and this and lifted his arms above his head and wriggled his hands and the shadow mimicked every finger, every nodding lock of hair.

"I ain't afraid of you!" he whispered to the shadows. "I got a watch that ticks! I got a watch that shines in the dark!" And with that he scurried back into the bed and lay still for a long while, heart thundering, daring not look to see if the shadow man had been angered as before and had stayed, fixed to that white square of moonlight: watching, waiting, speculating before he moved on, singing down some fateful country lane. At last he forced his eyes to turn again and look and he saw that the man was not there. Only the others remained: the horse dancing and the soldier waving his sword at the circling winter galaxies and the clown pirouetting on his spindly legs. But the night of the hunter was gone for ever. And so John pulled the gospel quilt snug round his ear and fell into a dreamless winter sleep, curled up beneath the quaint, stiff calico figures of the world's forgotten kings, and the strong, gentle shepherds of that fallen, ancient time who had guarded their small lambs against the night.



Davis Grubb



DAVIS GRUBB was born at Moundsville, West Virginia, in 1919 and named after his grandfather, a steamboat captain on the Ohio River. Of himself and his writing Mr. Grubb says: "Being born and raised within sight, smell and taste of the river had an influence on my mind and soul that seems to have survived all others. Although I have not been to the bottom lands in more years than I can remember, the music and grandeur of the Ohio River have never left me and I think they never will."

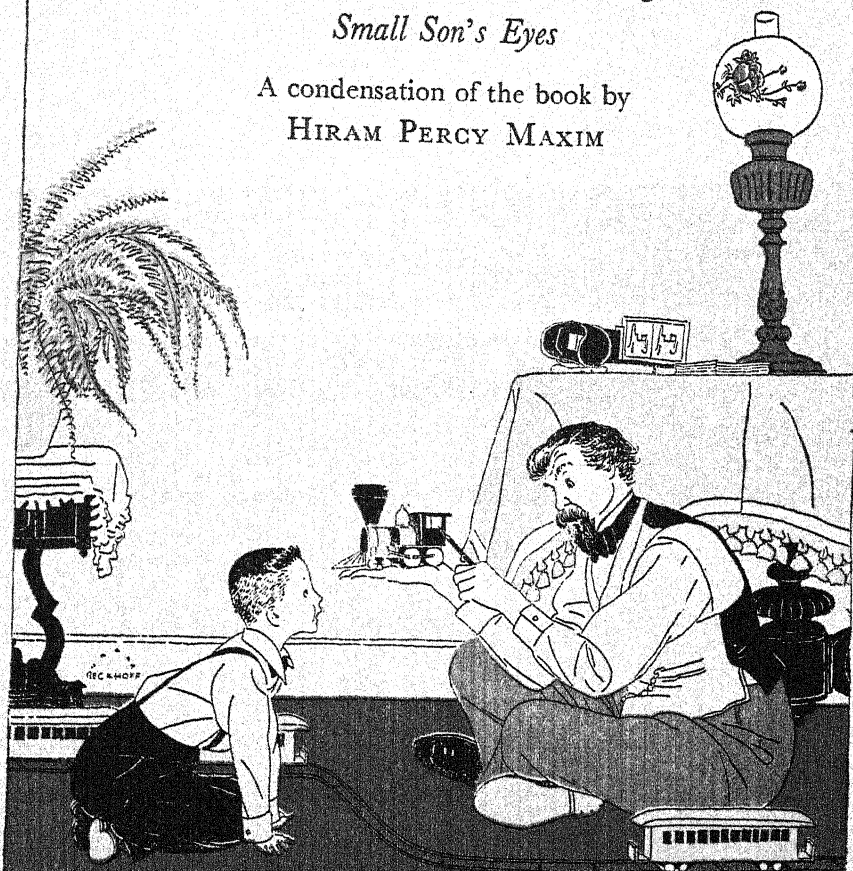
At one point Mr. Grubb considered painting as a career and attended an art school in Pittsburgh, but writing claimed more and more of his attention. His short stories have appeared in a number of famous magazines, but *The Night of the Hunter* is his first novel.

Illustrations by Harry Beckhoff


A Genius in the Family

*Sir Hiram Stevens Maxim Through a
Small Son's Eyes*

A condensation of the book by
HIRAM PERCY MAXIM



A Genius in the Family is published by Michael Joseph, London

HE *Genius in the Family* was the great inventor of the Maxim gun, Sir Hiram Stevens Maxim. As gifted at practical joking as he was at inventing, he was an amazing and wonderful man to have for a father; family life with him was sometimes bewildering and often hilarious, but it was never dull.

First published in 1936, Hiram Percy Maxim's story of his remarkable childhood is a classic of home life which deserves its place in every library. Beneath its delightful humour there are lessons for every parent—as, for example, when Sir Hiram teaches his children arithmetic painlessly, or uses his own unique method of discipline. This is a book to read aloud, to the whole family.

"A Genius in the Family is a truly gorgeous affair . . ." —Barrington Gates in the
New Statesman and Nation

"The book is a little gem."—*The Queen*

So LITTLE is said in this book of the remarkable achievements of the family "genius" that a word of reminder may be necessary. Sir Hiram Stevens Maxim was one of the most brilliant and renowned engineers and inventors of his day. Born in America in 1840, he had less than five years of schooling. In his youth he took odd jobs as carriage-painter and mechanic, meanwhile studying science and engineering with furious intensity.

By the time this book opens (in the early 1870's) he was already a rising inventor. In 1878 he became chief engineer of one of the first electric-lighting concerns in America.

His fame came chiefly from his invention of the Maxim gun, the first efficient automatic gun; but he also made a fundamental contribution to development of the incandescent carbon lamp, and invented automatic gas-generating plants, steam and vacuum pumps, and numerous other important devices.—PUBLISHER'S NOTE

MY FATHER had a brilliancy which sparkled, a cleverness and resourcefulness that placed him above any other man I ever knew. But he gave every evidence that he thought fatherhood was a means provided by nature for perpetrating humorous misconceptions upon inexperienced offspring. As the first of these offspring I was the butt of a host of amazing undertakings. I lived an utterly different sort of family life from that of any of my young friends. Having had no previous experience in being brought up, I was not conscious that there was anything unique about my situation, and it was not until my family gradually settled down to the conventional that I realized what an unusual life we had been living. I think that the following examples of clever invention, amazing audacity, extraordinary humour and passionate persistence of purpose (and heaven-born patience on the part of my mother) may be of interest outside the family. It is in this spirit that I present these scenes from the family life of my father.



IN THE corner of our street in Brooklyn was a chemist's shop to which I was sent frequently on errands. The man in the shop owned a gentle little white dog which seemed to like me. We had no dog at our house. All we had was a very small baby which cried too much. One day I told the man at the chemist's that I loved his dog, and suggested to him that it would be very nice if he gave it to me. Indeed, I suspect that I suggested this several times. The man became impatient, finally, and one day told me to go out and find a penny with a head on each side and bring it to him and he would give me the dog. This seemed a simple thing to do, so I hurried home to get one. I found my mother and asked her to let me see all of her money. When I told her why, she smiled and explained that the man was joking, that he had made the offer only because he knew there was no such thing as a penny with a head on both sides. My mother was wasting her breath. I insisted that we look over her pennies.

I remember how we argued as we went to get her purse; and how disappointed I was when I found that every one of her pennies had a head on one side only. I was thwarted, but by no means defeated. I made up my mind that my problem was above a woman's head and that I would be obliged to seek my father's assistance. He was a man and I was very sure that he could find me a penny with a head on both sides, for he could do wonderful things.

The rest of the afternoon was spent waiting for him at the corner. Finally he arrived. Running up to him, I asked him to look in his pockets and see if he had a penny with a head on both sides. Naturally he was astonished, but instead of showing his surprise and treating me as though I were a little child, he pretended to take the matter seriously. He fished out of his pocket all the coins he had, and selecting the pennies, we went carefully over each one. They all had a head on one side only. He professed surprise at this and he went over them again to be sure. This encouraged me, for obviously he had expected to find a two-headed

coin. Evidently they were to be had, which was precisely the impression he wished to convey to me.

He asked me casually what I wanted the penny for. I told him. "Well," said my father, "that ought to be easy. When I go over to New York tomorrow I will see if I can find one. They must have plenty of them over there." I was very much elated. I knew my father would have no trouble with a little matter like this. He could do anything. When he left for New York the next morning I was careful to remind him about the penny. He assured me he would not forget.

The next day I thought late afternoon would never come. I had made up my mind just where I was going to have the little dog sleep, where he was going to have his meals, and what we were going to do together. In the meantime, a very busy man in New York, with heavy responsibilities, went into his factory tool-room, put a penny in a lathe and faced off the "tail" side of it until it was just half the thickness of a normal penny. He repeated the operation with another penny. He then soldered these two thin half pennies together, thereby producing a coin of normal thickness but with a *head on both sides*. When the edge had been burnished the joint could not be seen.

When he arrived that afternoon I was waiting at the corner. I ran out and asked him if he had found the penny. Acting as though he had forgotten the matter, but that on a chance shot he might have one among his other coins, he reached into his pocket and drew them out. There were several pennies, and looking at each one, he picked out one which had a head on both sides. I was for going and getting the dog forthwith, but my father suggested that we go home for supper first. I can see my mother now, as we three sat at the table, she astounded at the double-headed penny, utterly unable to account for it, but knowing it was a trick, while my father laughed at her. Knowing my father as she did, she must have said what I heard her say many hundreds of times in later years, "Now, Hiram, please don't do anything foolish and in bad taste." This all went over my head. What possible objection could my mother have to the proceeding?

After supper my father and I sauntered up to the chemist's. As we entered, my father hung back. Running up to the man, I held out my double-headed penny and told him I had come for the dog. The man took the penny, turned it over and over again, glanced at my father in a sheepish sort of way, and gave every evidence of being thoroughly taken aback. I suppose that this little scene was what my father had been looking forward to all day. The chemist asked me where I had obtained the penny. I told him that my father had given it to me. This involved the latter, who then stepped forward, asking what the difficulty seemed to be. The chemist held out the penny in a helpless sort of way, saying something about a joke. My father took the penny, glanced at it casually, and handed it back, saying that he could not remember having seen one like it before.

I asked if I was going to get the dog. To my complete dismay, the chemist indicated that I was not. My father did not put as much value on the dog as did I. He appeared to be involved in the legal aspects of the case. After a lot of talking, during which I thought him particularly stupid, because he knew perfectly the original terms of the bargain between me and the chemist, he appeared to discover the nature of the proposition for the first time. Having established this, my father summed up the difficulty. It appeared to him I had been offered a certain dog in consideration of my bringing in a penny with a head on both sides. It was now up to the chemist, he said, to fulfil his part of the bargain. Of course the chemist had not the slightest intention of giving up the dog. When this became clear my father told him sternly that he should be more careful about making offers in the future, unless he proposed to live up to them.

We took our double-headed penny home. I was very much disappointed. It was my first contact with a broken pledge. My father did not take my view of the matter. He had had his little joke; the chemist had been given the surprise of his life and had been placed in an embarrassing position. That was all there was to it. The incident was closed.



WITH my father one never knew what was going to happen from one moment to the next. One Sunday morning he asked if I had noticed that the policeman on the beat spent an hour or so every Sunday in the area of the house across the street. I had noticed it and I had also seen that the housemaid of the people opposite was involved in these visits. My father asked me what I imagined could be the trouble over there that they had to call the police every Sunday morning. I had on two or three occasions heard my father use the word "sparking," so I suggested that perhaps the policeman was sparking the housemaid. My father was amazed at my knowledge, for I was only five. I could see little crinkly lines appearing round his eyes and I knew that I had interested him.

He pretended to be concerned about the sparking business. We watched the policeman and the maid, and finally he said: "Percy, we ought to make them stop that sparking every Sunday morning. We cannot have this policeman spending his time sparking when he should be watching for bad people."

There seemed a certain virtue in this point of view, and I asked how we could stop them. Said he: "Of course, we can't go over there and tell them to stop sparking; but we could get a bean-blower and blow beans at them." I inquired what he meant.

"Well, I'll tell you," said he. "Between now and next Sunday I shall bring over from New York a long brass tube that will be nice and straight. It will be just big enough on the inside to accept a bean. Then we can get some beans from Mamma and blow them over there and make him stop sparking the housemaid."

I gave my whole-hearted support to the plan. I recall how funny he looked when he cautioned me not to tell Mamma about it because she would not understand. He was absolutely right.

When the next Sunday came round I had forgotten about the sparking business. But my father had not. When my mother had disappeared upstairs for the morning, he laid aside a drawing he was working on and, calling me, pointed across the street, remarking that they were at it again. That reminded me and I asked him if he had remembered to bring the brass tube. He said he

had it in the cupboard where we kept our umbrellas, and that he had the beans, too.

After much shifting of furniture and adjusting of the window curtain we were ready to blow our first bean. I was very much excited. To my surprise, my father pointed the bean-blowing tube at the top of the building across the street. Putting his mouth to the tube, he sent a little white bean across the street where it struck the building about three stories up, directly over the spot where the policeman and the housemaid were sparking. The bean bounced off the wall of the building and fell vertically into the area. Nothing happened, so my father blew another. It also fell into the area. It seemed to me to be a most curious way to go about "smoking out" a policeman. But I was wrong.

After half a dozen beans had been blown the policeman came out and looked hard at the windows over his head. It was then that I appreciated my father's strategy. By blowing the beans against the wall and high up, he made them appear to be coming from overhead. The policeman peered at all the windows, waiting for the unknown one upstairs to throw another bean, so that he could catch him at it. But nothing came, my father being too clever to blow while the policeman was looking up.

Presently he went down into the area again, which was the signal for a perfect fusillade of beans. Out the policeman popped again, this time walking out to the pavement to gain a better view of the windows above. But nobody was in sight, so the mystified man could only return to the area and the housemaid. He had no more than entered when the beans rained down again. This time he dashed out, thinking to be so quick that he would catch the blower. But there was somebody quicker than he was. He had not a chance in the world. He walked about this time in a most determined manner, my father in the meantime rolling about in gales of merriment. I remember that I thought it was a good joke, but that—like all my father's jokes—it was not entirely above criticism. It seemed to me to be playing with fire, this making a policeman the butt of the joke.

The policeman finally had to give up and return to the area.

The instant his figure disappeared into the area another downfall of beans took place. He did not pop out so quickly this time. When he did come out he waved good-bye to the housemaid and came directly over to our side of the street. I thought he had detected us and I became alarmed. I suspect my father had a bit of a turn, because he rushed to the umbrella cupboard with the tube and the beans, and when he returned pretended to be hard at work on his drawing. However, the policeman had come across the street in order to obtain a good view of all the windows in the house opposite. He stopped directly in front of our window, not fifteen feet from my father and me, and waited several minutes.

We broke up that morning's sparking and several other sessions. Finally the policeman had to give up and do his sparking at other times. He never found out where the beans came from.

WE moved to Fanwood, New Jersey, in the spring of 1875. My father used to come out from New York on Saturday afternoons and remain with us until Monday morning. It was very much "out in the country" for us. We had a horse and carriage, a barn, a pig, some chickens and a cow.

One Sunday morning my father made the startling announcement that he was going to hypnotize a chicken. He had been reading about it in a scientific paper. I had not the remotest idea what hypnotize meant, and when I asked him what it meant he said, "You know—sort of mesmerize him." The trouble with this explanation was that I did not know what "mesmerize" meant. I was just as much at sea as ever. However, I knew it would be interesting, and I determined to be on hand.

He said that he would need some chalk and a chicken, and that, considering Mamma's way of regarding matters of this sort, we had better perform the operation out in the barn. When I had found a piece of chalk we went out to the barn and cleared away a place on the floor. I could see that the hypnotizing operation was going to require a lot of space. Then we went out to where the chickens were. He asked my opinion about which one we'd better hypnotize. He was very apt to ask my advice on matters of



this sort, consulting me at length as though I were his equal. I have no doubt that I was very earnest and that he extracted a lot of fun out of the naïve answers of a child not yet six.

I told him that I didn't know which chicken would be best because I didn't know what he was going to do. Again he said, "Oh—you know—just mesmerize it." This got us nowhere, so he selected a rooster without more ado and told me to chase him slowly, not to catch him, but to keep running him until he told me to stop. This was nothing less than a gift from heaven, for I was strictly forbidden to chase the chickens and it was something I dearly loved to do. Here I was being sent to do it!

I started to chase the rooster. At first he was very spry as well as thoroughly astonished, but after a few minutes his wind gave out. I kept steadily after him, and it was easy to see that he was utterly at a loss to understand what in the world had suddenly happened. When he showed signs of becoming groggy, my father called to me that that would be enough. He then caught the rooster, carried him into the barn and set him down on the barn floor. He pushed the bird's head down so that his beak was close to the floor, and placed the chalk directly in front of his beak. Moving the white chalk back and forth a bit to attract the bird's attention, my father held the creature motionless a moment and then slowly drew a broad white mark about a foot and a half long on the barn floor straight out from the rooster's beak. Then he rose, walked about, and waved his arms, as though to shoo the rooster away; but the creature never moved. He remained absolutely motionless, squatted down, staring fixedly at the chalk mark.

My father explained to me that the chicken was hypnotized or mesmerized. He wanted to see how long the bird would remain in that condition, so we sat down and watched it. I imagine we sat there for something like three minutes. Suddenly the rooster seemed to awaken from a sleep. He raised his head, looked round, gave a violent flap of his wings and ran out of the barn, cackling indignantly. My father was delighted.

WE MOVED back to Brooklyn late in 1877 after purchasing a home on Union Street. I was considerably more of a boy by this time, and as I grew older it was natural that I should become more of a problem to my mother. My besetting sins were teasing my sisters and breaking things around the house. One day I accidentally broke a ceiling-height mirror in my mother's room.

When she beheld the damage she sank into a chair and wept. She told me that as things were going there was no living with me, and that she would have to turn me over to my father for a good whipping. This was a brand-new idea to me. I could not remember that my father had ever laid a hand upon me.

That evening he was shown my latest and worst offence. He sank into a chair, held his head in his hands, rocked back and forth in exquisite agony, and gave several similar indications of being completely undone. He made it an extremely painful scene for me and I certainly did feel low in my mind. My mother told him that I was getting entirely out of hand and that he must give me a good whipping or I would break everything in the house. Father said that he would attend to it after supper.

Supper was a doleful affair. I had never sat through such a nerve-wearing ordeal before. I was in the deepest disgrace.

After supper my father announced that he would read his paper first and then take up the whipping matter. I wondered what it would be like to be whipped. My mother had spanked me many times, but I did not regard that as a whipping. I waited patiently, sitting in a deep gloom.

When my father had finished his paper he got up briskly, saying, "Well, now. Come along, Percy. Let's attend to this whipping business." He led the way out into the back garden where we visited my mother's shrubs and bushes from which a suitable whip was to be cut. My father had his pocket-knife open, ready to cut a stalk that met the requirements. He explained to me that it was necessary to find one that had just the right length and thickness and straightness. If it were too short it would not have enough spring. If it were too long it would have too much spring and would break. If it were too thin it would be weak; whereas, if it were too thick it would bruise, which, of course, would not do.

We searched and searched without finding anything that just suited. I became interested in the problem and pointed out several sticks which appeared to meet the exacting specifications. After spending quite a time at it, my father finally decided that it was best to cut several and try them. He cut a long thin one, a long thick one, a middle-length one, and two other compromises. This made five whips. I was very much impressed with his technique. I could see that among all the whips it was more than likely that one would be found which would suit much better than possibly could be the case were only one to be selected by guessing. I did

not recognize it at the time, but I had received my first lesson in engineering research. After all had been prepared and whittled down smooth, he said, "Now, come along and we will try them." He led the way to the third floor front, which was his room, and took off his coat, his collar, and necktie, and rolled up his sleeves. I was a bit concerned at this, for it suggested that a whipping must be something calling for considerable activity.

He laid the five whips on the bed and, taking one at a time, he smote the coverlet. The savage whirr and the succeeding whack sounded all over the house. He put real muscle into it. The long thin whip broke. He explained that he had expected this to happen, for the stick was too thin for its length. The thick one made a fearful whirr and whack when it hit the coverlet. We rejected this one because it was evident that it would bruise. Later on, I heard my mother say that she never suffered such horrible nervous strain in all her life, listening to the whirr of the whips.

When we had whacked the bed coverlet for a long time, testing the whips and breaking most of them, my father was far from satisfied. He outlined in his clear way the problem as it confronted us. "What we need is something fairly long, very strong, and yet very light. It must also be very springy. Where can we find such a thing?" We thought and thought. By this time I was as keenly interested in the solution of the problem as though someone else were to receive the whipping. I suggested a baseball bat, pointing out that it would hit awfully hard.

"Oh, *much* too hard," he replied. "Why, you could break a man's back." He recoiled at the suggestion.

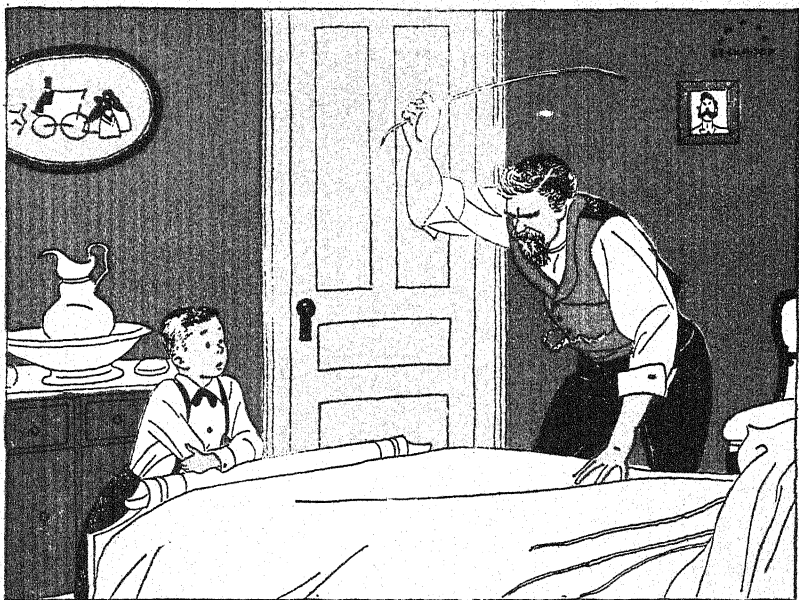
"I suppose a broomstick would be too stiff, too," I ventured.

"Altogether too stiff and too heavy. It would break bones."

There was a long pause while we both pondered. Then an idea occurred to me. "Gosh, Papa! I know the very thing. That thin cane of yours."

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "That's a good idea. Go and fetch it."

I hurried downstairs to the clothes cupboard. As I ran through the reception room, I passed my mother, who asked me what I was after. I answered: "We're trying to find a good whip. We're



going to try the thin cane." She asked something else, but I was much too busy to stop just then and explain.

She said afterwards that my being in such a hurry to find a cane with which to be whipped seemed one of the most extraordinary things she had ever heard of.

When I returned with the cane, my father whacked the coverlet with it with all his might. It made a particularly savage noise. After whacking the bed coverlet until my mother was ready to fly out of her skin, my father shook his head and asked me to try it. Getting the best grip I could, I whacked the bed for all that was in me. It only made a fair noise and my father feared my mother might not hear it. He told me to put more "beef" into it. I wiped off my hands, took a fresh grip, and belaboured the coverlet with all my might. When my father expressed disappointment over the weight of my blows, I explained that the cane's curved handle got in my way. My father was not satisfied and we went into executive session again. It was quite apparent to me that we would have to

do a lot of searching around to find exactly the right kind of whip. It must have appeared this way to my father, too, for he finally said, "Well, I guess we shall have to give up the whipping, Percy. We can't seem to find the right whip. But, anyway, you understand that you must be more careful around the house and that you must not make so much trouble for Mamma, don't you; and you will try to be a better boy, won't you, Percy?"

I was very deeply impressed by the way he said it. He was asking me as a favour to him and to Mamma to do something. I realized that it would be very mean indeed of me to fail to do as he asked. And it would be yet meaner not to try to make things more pleasant for Mamma. So I said, "Yes, Papa, I will." And then we went downstairs and explained to Mamma that the whipping matter had to be called off. I am glad to be able to say that I kept my promise in pretty fair shape, as time proved.

WE HAD a peach tree in our back garden in Brooklyn. I had noticed that something grew on the tree, but it was so dried up that I could not imagine what it might be. One day I took one of the miserable specimens to my father and asked him what it was.

"That's a peach," he said.

"A peach!" I exclaimed. "I never saw a peach that looked like that."

"Well, it's not much of a peach, Percy; but, you see, our tree never has any fertilizer put on it, so it can't grow good peaches."

I thought about this very seriously. It seemed a pity to have a peach tree and not get any peaches off it, so I said: "Papa, how could we make our tree give nice peaches?"

Whatever led the man to answer as he did is more than I shall attempt to explain. He said: "Oh, I suppose the best thing to do is to get an old dead cat and bury it at the foot of the tree."

"An old dead cat!" I repeated in astonishment. "Would an old dead cat make peaches grow on our peach tree?"

"Oh, yes, indeed! Grow like anything."

"Well, how long would it take them to grow?"

I suspect that he began to formulate a scheme at this point. Up

to this time he had merely been idly answering my questions.

"Well, Percy, I should say that if you buried a good big cat under the tree today, you would probably have plenty of beautiful peaches tomorrow morning."

This sounded too good to be true. I expected him to say a year. If a fine crop of peaches could be grown from one day to another, I proposed to find an old dead cat and bury it under the tree.

For the next few days I was constantly on the look out. On Saturday morning I finally found the carcass of a cat. It must have been dead a long time for it was very dry. But I hurried home with it and hid it temporarily in the back garden.

When my father returned home from business that afternoon, he brought a friend with him, which was disconcerting, as it broke up my plan for burying the cat. There was no way for me to bring up the matter that evening, so I decided to see my father about it as early as possible on Sunday morning.

Immediately after breakfast next morning, he and his friend went out on the back stoop and sat down to talk. I had to get at my father somehow, and after much deliberation I went up to him, put my mouth to his ear, and whispered, "Papa, I've got the dead cat." He stopped talking and shot me a surprised look.

"Dead cat, Percy!" he exclaimed.

"Sh-h-h," I warned. "Mamma will hear. You remember, Papa, don't you—the peaches?"

"O Lord! Why, of course—the peaches!" he replied. Then in a low voice and adopting my furtive manner, he whispered, "Where is it?"

"Down by the grape arbour under a box," I whispered back. In a low tone he told his friend that a dead cat was needed because, as everyone knew, if a dead cat is buried at the foot of a peach tree it brings peaches right out. The friend acquiesced and indicated that it was a well-known phenomenon. "Well, now, Percy," my father said, "I tell you what. You go and fetch the coal shovel and we will bury it right away. Then we shall wait and watch the peaches come out."

Things were working splendidly. I fetched the shovel and the

three of us went out to the peach tree. My father started digging and I went after the dead cat. It was but a few minutes' work for him to dig a deep enough hole, after which we pushed the dead cat in and covered it up. When the job was finished, I asked my father how long it would be before the peaches would grow. Looking at his watch, and casting a meaningful look at his friend, he answered: "Oh, some time this afternoon. They ought to be pretty good by late afternoon, I should say." Shortly after this my sister Florence and I left for Sunday-school and were absent for a couple of hours. During this interval my father and his friend must have gone out and purchased a basket of very large peaches. They must have brought them home, climbed the tree, and stuck the peaches on the twigs of the tree. All this was entirely unknown to me.

Just before one o'clock little Florence and I came home, and I heard my father shout, "Percy! Percy! Come quickly!" I dashed out to the back stoop, knowing that something big had happened.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "The peaches are out!"

One look and I was staggered by the sight. The tree was loaded with peaches. I made a rush for the tree and was up in it in a moment. Shouting to my mother to hurry and bring a basket, I began picking the fruit. I remember to this day my intense excitement and also my surprise at finding that the peaches were impaled upon the little twigs. I had not expected to find that they grew that way. I picked the peaches off, calling my mother's attention to the enormous size of them. It seemed to me I had never participated in anything so exciting in all my life. Presently they were all picked and I came down out of the tree. I was amazed. There was a basket full of peaches—which had come out of the same basket less than an hour before.

For several years thereafter I was completely convinced of the potency of the dead-cat treatment as a means of fertilizing peaches.

A TIME came when my mother grew concerned over my father's health. He had led a very active country life during his youth, and his present city life with its days and nights of unremitting toil was beginning to tell upon even his rugged physique.

My mother urged him to take an hour's exercise daily in the open air, and so one evening at about seven-thirty he asked me to come along with him. We walked up to Court Street which was a business street and full of people at that time of the evening. When we got there my father said: "Let's get some exercise, Percy." With this he pulled his silk hat down upon his head, buttoned up his Prince Albert coat and, stepping into the middle of the street, started running towards City Hall with all his might.

I had all I could do to keep up with him, but I saw that he made much heavier weather of it than I did. He had a lot more weight to carry and the cobblestones were rough for him. We passed Sackett Street going like the wind. At Degraw Street the speed had slackened off perceptibly. Somewhere about Butler Street he became completely winded and stopped. He limped over to the pavement and leaned heavily against a post. He puffed like nothing human. I never saw a person so utterly spent. I waited in silence for the next move. In a few minutes he partially recovered, straightened his hat and wheezed something to the effect that we had better walk home slowly.

By the time we reached home he was very lame, and looked as though he were very ill indeed. My mother was calmly reading in the drawing-room when we walked in. He went directly to her and, drawing up a chair very close to hers, he wilted into it. Startled, she exclaimed, "Why, Hiram! What's the matter?"

He had a queer way with him when he did not feel well. It was to gaze steadily and very gloomily into my mother's face at very close range, giving the impression that he awaited her assistance, or was about to burst into tears, or die. This he now did.

Deeply concerned, my excitable little mother repeated, "Hiram! What's the matter with you?"

Offering absolutely no response at all, he continued to gaze sadly into her eyes. At last he lifted one leg limply and held out his foot to her, wheezing hoarsely, "Please take it off, Jane."

She pulled the shoe off the foot offered her, and then with a show of the greatest difficulty, as though his strength were fast ebbing, he held out the other foot. She pulled the shoe off and



examined his feet. There seemed to be nothing wrong and, looking critically at his face again, she said, "Hiram, tell me what has happened."

He replied in a wheezy whisper, "You nearly killed me, Jane."

"I nearly killed you, Hiram! For mercy's sake, what did I do?"

After much grotesque gulping, which suggested a person in the last throes of something dreadful, he croaked, "*Exercise.*"

"Did the exercise hurt your feet?" my mother asked. All she got from this was a very sickly nod. "Does it hurt you to walk?"

His reply to this was to hold up both hands, roll his eyes to heaven, and then point to his stockinged feet, which he then managed to curl up and make appear frightfully deformed. My sensitive mother recoiled at those two "deformed" feet, not daring to look at them again. Convinced that she had a sick husband on her hands, she rose and in her decisive little way announced, "You must go right to bed this minute and I shall send for the doctor. Come along." She began assisting him to his feet.

At this he entirely regained his normal voice and said, quite briskly, "Jane, it was you who made me go out and exercise. It nearly killed me."

"For mercy's sake, what sort of exercise did you take?"

"I ran with all my might nearly down to City Hall with Percy for exercise. I simply could not run any farther."

"*Ran down nearly to City Hall!* What do you mean—*ran?*"

"Just ran. Did you never see anybody run, Jane?"

"Do you mean to tell me that you *ran* down Court Street to City Hall, Hiram?"

"We did just what you told us to do. Didn't we, Percy? You told us we needed exercise, and we went out and got a lot of it in a few minutes. I did my best to get to City Hall for you, Jane, but my strength gave out. I don't think you realized how far it is to City Hall when you made me go out and run there."

Mother was speechless. After half an hour of blaming her for nearly causing his death, my father pulled on his shoes with vigour, gave her one of his bear hugs, and went to work on his drawing board. Poor lady! She lived an eventful life.

WHEN my sister Florence had been at school long enough to begin arithmetic, something happened and she could not go on. The child appeared unable to grasp what it was the teacher wanted her to do. Possibly it was the combination of a stupid and unimaginative teacher and an intensely imaginative and highly-strung child. After this difficulty had continued for some time, my mother was requested to call at the school to talk about her daughter's standing. The teacher informed her that Florence had exhibited a total inability to understand arithmetic. Manifestly the child was defective mentally.

If there is one thing which a mother will not believe, it is that her child is defective mentally. When she heard this, fire entered my mother's eye. She said she would take her daughter home, have a talk with her and bring her back to school. She served notice she would show all concerned that it was somebody other than her daughter who was mentally defective. That evening my mother unburdened her soul to my father. "A child of mine defective mentally!" he snorted. He was for going over to the school and cleaning out the place. There was a long conference during which my mother got it across to him that the trouble had been with arithmetic, and if he would take a hand in the matter Florence might be brought out of her difficulty. He had pulled me out of a terrible difficulty which I had met in long division. He had made it such a fascinating pastime that I used to divide enormous numbers by other enormous numbers just for the fun of doing it.

After supper he inveigled Florence into conversation about games and puzzles. I suspected this might be the beginning of something interesting, so I hung about. He suddenly directed his conversation at me, which was disconcerting until I realized he was talking at Florence through me. Finally, he said:

"I say, Florence, you ought to be the kind that enjoys arithmetic. You have such a clear mind that you would be good at it. It's lots of fun, when you play it the right way. Do you have arithmetic at your school?"

Florence was not enthusiastic. She indicated that they had arithmetic at her school but she did not like it.

"Oh, well, if you don't like it, then they are not playing it right. Let me show you how we used to play it when I was a boy. Percy, go down to the kitchen and fetch me a handful of beans."

This was enough for me. Something big was in the wind. I fetched the beans in a jiffy.

"Now, Florence, I'm going to play arithmetic with Percy first. After you see how we play it I shall play it with you, because I know you would play it better than most people. You are much smarter than most children of your age."

He placed ten beans in a vertical row on a sheet of paper. He then asked me to add up the beans and write down how many there were. I ran up the row and counted ten.

"All right," said he. "Now draw a line at the bottom and write down ten, so we won't be forgetting it." I did so.

"All right. That's easy, of course. Anybody can do that. Now I am going to make it a little harder."

He then laid down on the paper in a vertical row five groups of two beans each. "Draw your line and add those up," said he. I started to count them up one at a time, but he stopped me, saying, "Oh, no. That's too easy. You must add the piles. Two and two make four, four and two make six—like that."

I caught the idea, so I added them by piles, drew my line and wrote down "10." Florence was getting interested. I saw that she was getting a new slant on arithmetic, as indeed I was also. "Oh, well," my father said, "we shall catch him yet, shan't we, Florence?"

Florence's response was a grunt. Next he arranged two groups of four beans each and one little group of two beans. I had the scheme by this time, so I rattled off, "Four and four make eight, eight and two make ten."

"Let me do it now, Papa," said Florence. This was exactly what he had been playing for, but he was not going to let her into the game too easily. "Let Percy and me finish," he said.

He must have slipped another bean into his hand at this juncture, for he laid down one group of seven beans and over this a group of four. I had not noticed that he had smuggled in an extra

bean. Before he had the beans arranged, I started adding, "Seven and three make——"

"No, no," exclaimed Florence, her eyes flashing. "There are four beans there! That makes one more. *Eleven!*" she shouted, intent upon beating me to the answer. "It's eleven, isn't it, Papa?"

"Eleven?" my father questioned, as though surprised. "It always has been ten," and he winked at me.

Florence had her eyes on the beans and did not see the wink. "It's eleven beans, Papa. Don't you see? There are seven in that pile and four in that one."

"But we only had ten beans. How can it be eleven?"

Florence was sure, and when Florence was sure that ended it. "Papa!" she insisted. "How many beans are there all together? Count them."

He counted the seven group one at a time and continued with the four, ending up with eleven. He seemed to be completely mystified. Florence, her piercing eyes on his face, awaited his comprehension. But comprehension did not seem to come.

"Don't you understand, Papa?" she queried, with a touch of impatience at his slowness. Hesitatingly, he repeated, "Seven and four make——" He appeared to be stuck fast.

"Eleven," Florence prompted. "Can't you understand, Papa?" It was she who was giving the lesson in arithmetic now.

He removed one bean from the four group, as though struggling with the problem.

"That's ten now," she exclaimed, "because there are only three in that pile now."

"I guess you must be right, Florence, but let's go on." Florence cast a look at me which said, "Gee, but he's stupid."

Then he laid out eight beans in one group and two in the other. Both Florence and I shouted at the top of our lungs, "Eight and two make ten!" But before we could get it out of our mouths he slipped three more beans into the smaller pile. Florence and I stared at each other as we struggled to be first in performing the mental feat of adding three more beans. It was a dead heat. We

shouted in concert, "Eight and five make thirteen!"

It is not necessary to review here how he led little Florence into adding up all sorts of combinations, gradually shifting into subtraction without her realizing it. We played the game all the evening, he being clever enough to keep changing it so that our interest was not allowed to flag. My mother finally had to stop us so that Florence could go to bed.

The next day Florence was taken back to school by my mother. I do not know exactly what happened then, though I have always believed that my father's clever manipulation straightened out some preconceived notion that had been holding her back; but I do know that from that day on, until finally Florence left high school, she stood number one in every one of her classes, except on three or four occasions when she slipped and had to accept number two. When she had to accept second place, she considered herself disgraced. It used to require the efforts of the entire family to lift her out of her gloom.

ONE OF the great troubles which pursued my father day and night was absent-mindedness. He insisted upon losing umbrellas, packages, books, and drawings, until finally he became desperate. In his characteristic way he once sought my sympathy. I was only a little boy, but all my life he had treated me as an equal, so it was entirely natural for him to come to me.

He held his head in his hands as he sat on the back stoop, sighed like a blast furnace, and remarked that he believed he would burst out crying. I had no desire to see such a terrible thing happen, so I sought to console him.

"What makes you feel like crying, Papa?" I asked.

"Oh, nobody cares about me, nobody helps me, everybody is cross with me when I lose my things."

Unless I cheered him up I could see that we would both be in tears. "We all love you, Papa. Mamma does, and I do, and Florence does, too."

"Yes, but that doesn't stop me from losing my things. Yesterday I lost my gloves. Today I lost a roll of drawings."

"Well, why don't you hold them in your hand, Papa? That's the way I do. I just hang right on to it all the time, and never put it down until I get home. Then I can't lose it."

"But the trouble is, I forget and I put it down, and then I walk away without it."

I had to admit that this was a difficult problem. If he could not remember to hold things in his hands, it seemed very baffling.

"Well, Papa, could you remember just one thing—just one single thing to do always?"

"I wonder if I could. What would it be, Percy?"

"It seems to me that if you had a piece of paper with your name on it, and if you could remember to put it on everything when you first pick it up, then when you lost it somebody would find it and send it to you."

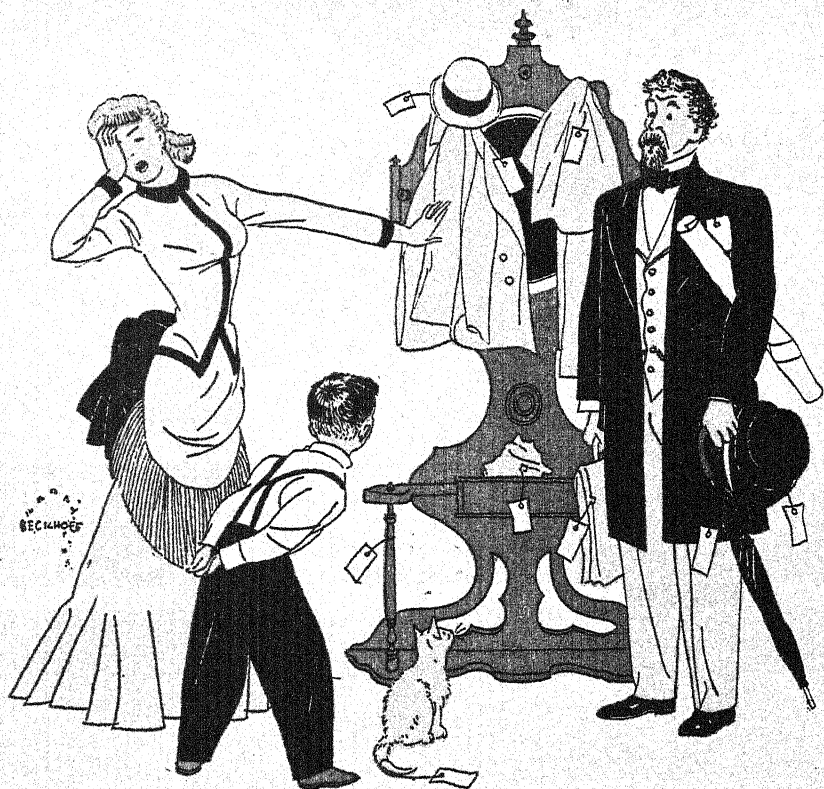
"Well, now, Percy! That's an excellent idea." He was surprised and immensely pleased at my having exhibited enough imagination to formulate a solution of a baffling problem.

He was so impressed with my idea that he had paper labels printed. I remember clearly. They were approximately the size of small luggage labels and bore the interesting inscription :

THIS WAS LOST BY A DAMNED FOOL NAMED
HIRAM STEVENS MAXIM
WHO LIVES AT 325 UNION STREET, BROOKLYN
A SUITABLE REWARD WILL BE PAID FOR
ITS RETURN

He used these labels until he seemed to have tied one on everything we owned. My mother finally lost her patience and vetoed their further use.

ONE DAY I saw in Crandall's toy-shop a small stationary steam-engine. It was a little bit of a thing, having a copper boiler which would hold not more than a quarter of a teacup of water. It had a diminutive alcohol lamp under the boiler and a single oscillating engine on top. It was a very primitive steam-engine, but it was real



and it would run. When my father came home that evening I told him about it. "Gosh, Papa, you ought to see it! It has a little fly-wheel and all!" My enthusiasm was so overpowering that he put down his paper and looked at me with that quizzical expression which made him look as though he were trying not to laugh.

"Oh, I've seen those engines. The engine has a lead fly-wheel on one end of its shaft and a grooved pulley on the other end. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right. Gee, Papa, but couldn't we have fun if we had one!"

"Do you know what the grooved pulley is for?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered. "You put a string on it and run the string to another wheel and it makes the other wheel go. They have a little toy factory down at Crandall's and all the machines are made to go by strings and wheels from one engine. Gosh, Papa! You ought to see all the things they have there."

"Is it open at night, do you suppose?" asked my father, still with that quizzical look.

"I don't know, wait till I ask Mamma," and I was off like a wild thing for my mother upstairs.

"Mamma, do you suppose Crandall's is open at night?"

"Crandall's? Only on Saturday nights."

When Saturday evening came I brought up the engine again and my father happened to be in the mood, so we set out for Crandall's. I was so excited I could not walk; I had to skip and jump. Arriving at the shop, I pointed out the engine in the show window and he took a good look at it.

"Let's go inside and see what it's like," he finally remarked. Things were coming along beautifully. I had never induced him to go into a shop that he did not buy me something before he got out.

A young woman waited upon us and my father told her we had come in to look over their steam-engines. She brought out samples of every steam-engine they had.

My father, the chief engineer of the United States Electric Lighting Company, pleaded ignorance of machinery, and he quickly had the young lady so completely tangled up with his questions that I had to step in and prompt her. She was not at all well informed about steam machinery. When I explained a detail to her I recall that she and my father exchanged glances and smiles and it was not very long before I found myself explaining the engines to both of them. My father appeared to be intensely interested but particularly stupid.

"Do you have to bother with putting water in it to make it go?" he asked. I was too excited to realize that I was being led on.

"You have to have water to boil if you want any steam, Papa. You have to have water in the *Flirt's* boiler, don't you?"

"The *Flirt* is our steam-launch," my father felt called upon to

explain to the saleswoman. Then to me: "Oh yes. But the *Flirt* is a steamboat."

I thought this about as weak an argument as could be devised. "SteamBOAT!" I exploded. "What's that got to do with it, Papa? It's the steam-engine in the boat that makes the boat go. The steam is for the engine—not the boat," and I shot him a sharp look of impatience.

"Oh!" he answered uncomprehendingly.

"Did you think the steam pushed against the boat and made it go?" I asked, exasperated and eyeing him intently.

"Well—I—something pushes against the boat, Percy, or it wouldn't go."

"Gosh, Papa! When you boil water and get steam, you let the steam go into the steam-engine and it makes the engine go, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"When the steam-engine goes, it makes the propeller go, doesn't it?"

"Yes—but——"

"But what?"

"It seems—I should think—never mind. Go ahead."

"Well, when the propeller goes, it pushes against the water and this makes the boat go ahead. Everybody knows that, Papa."

By this time I suppose my voice had become very loud and penetrating, for I remember that we were the centre of all eyes in the shop. "That's all right, if you have a boat; but this is not a boat," my father insisted, picking up the smallest of the engines, idly twisting the little fly-wheel and looking very silly.

"Of course it's not a boat. It's an engine, Papa. But it will go if you put water in the boiler and light the lamp. Anyway, I can make it go."

"Are you sure you can make it go, Percy?"

"Yes, Papa, I'm sure."

At this point he nodded to the saleswoman and she wrapped the engine up and handed it to me. When we got home my father explained the penalty when too much water is put into the boiler,

or too little water, and for failure to blow out the lamp before the last bit of water is boiled away.

As he talked on I found, to my surprise, that he suddenly knew much more about the engine than I did. I played with this engine for a long time, learning every minute detail of its construction. I must have impressed my parents with my genuine love and appreciation of it, because the day came when my father bought me a little steam-locomotive, a train of coaches and some track.

It was the high point in my life up to this time. I actually owned my own steam-locomotive and railway! But the point is that I had already been trained to understand how it worked. I played regularly with this little steam-train for many years, and never injured the boiler or any of the delicate machinery.

In later years my father designed and built the first of those millions of guns which were to be known the world over as Maxim guns. He offered this gun to the American authorities, but it was declined on the grounds of impracticability. This reception of his invention wounded him deeply; he brought his gun to England and offered it to the War Office, which took it up. He formed the Maxim Gun Company, which in 1896 was merged with the great firm of Vickers. In the War of the Sudan his gun was used with conspicuous success; at the Battle of Omdurman it was one of the big factors in saving the day for the British. In 1900 he became a British subject; in 1901 he was knighted by Queen Victoria. He became internationally known and occupied a position of great importance and dignity.

At one time during the height of his glory it was observed by some of his associates that he went out every evening about seven-thirty and did not return until about nine-thirty. His associates had come to know him and his characteristics, and it was agreed that this mysterious absence every evening had better be investigated, lest Sir Hiram be led into doing something foolish. And so he was trailed one evening and seen to enter a building in the business district of London. About nine o'clock he came out and returned home.



Investigation disclosed that he had hired a front room in the top of the building. When the room was searched the only things found were a chair, a long brass tube, and a bag of black beans. Had I been one of the investigators I would have solved the mystery the moment I saw the brass tube and the beans.

It so happened that the Salvation Army paraded every evening in this part of London and held a meeting on the opposite side of the street. For some time complaints had been made to the police that someone was disturbing the Salvation Army group by dropping beans upon them. The beans always came from directly overhead and it was thought that some miscreant in the building in front of which the meetings were held was guilty of tossing out the beans. However, careful watch had failed to disclose anyone throwing beans, and a search of the building produced no evidence. Where the beans came from was an unsolved mystery.

Those who were trailing Sir Hiram kept a watch on the window of his room, and

it was thought that he was seen at the window at times; but nothing was thought of this until someone picked up one of the beans which had been thrown at the Salvation Army and found it was the same kind of bean that Sir Hiram had in the bag in his room. That was enough. Sir Hiram was the bean-thrower. He was making use of the same trick he used when he was a young man and lived in Brooklyn; he had been blowing the beans at the upper part of the building opposite, so that they bounced off and fell vertically, thus giving the impression that they were coming from directly overhead.

A session was held with Sir Hiram and it was explained that he had better give up this bean-blowing practice before he was discovered. He gave it up; but I knew he had enjoyed himself mystifying the Salvation Army people and having all the blame laid at the door of the occupants across the street. The use of black beans should be noted. It was impossible to trace their flight in the dark.



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Hiram Percy Maxim



HIRAM PERCY MAXIM, though he modestly says nothing of his own career in *A Genius in the Family*, was a worthy member of the fabulous Maxim tribe, which included not only his father, Sir Hiram Stevens Maxim, but also his uncle, Hudson Maxim, the inventor of smokeless powder. He himself was responsible for the Maxim silencer. He graduated from Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1886 at the age of seventeen, invented one of the first motor-cars in his early twenties, and for some years worked as a motor designer.

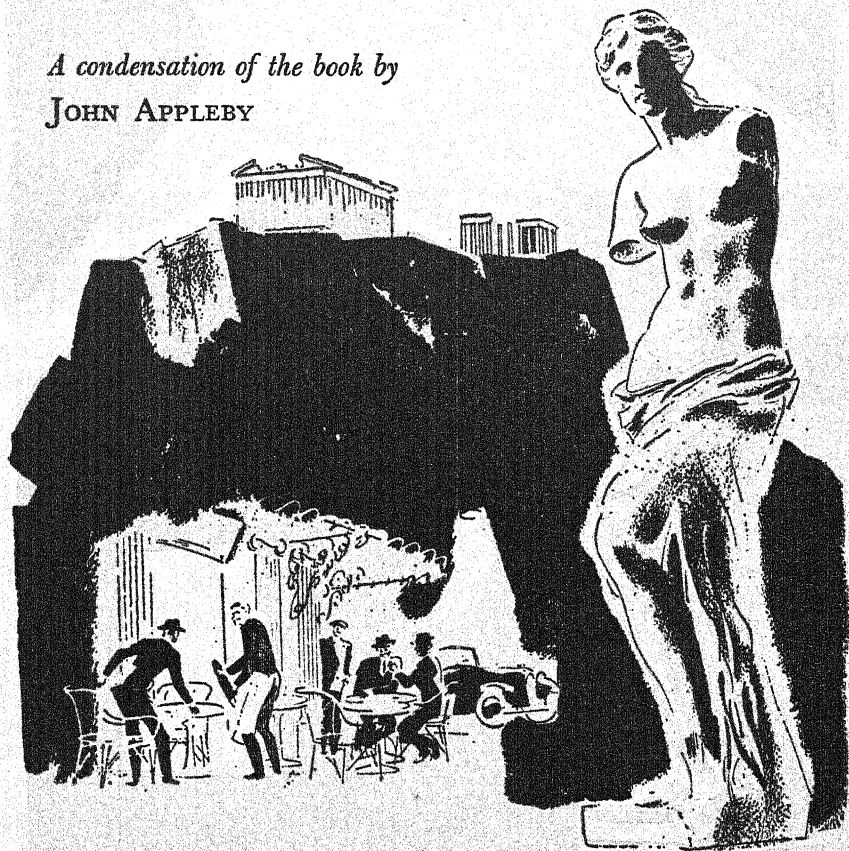
By 1912 he was already famous for his invention of the silencer and was immersed in radio, with an amateur station of his own. He was the first president of the American Radio Relay League, and, later, of the Amateur Cinema League. As sidelines, with typical Maxim energy, he sailed his own yachts and was keenly interested in aviation.

Unlike his explosive and eccentric father, Hiram Percy Maxim was a serene, easy-going man, with a gentle humour that shines through his books. (He wrote *Horseless Carriage Days* as well as *A Genius in the Family*.) His marriage was idyllic—a fact made sadly clear when he died of a sudden illness in 1936, for Mrs. Maxim, though she had been in perfect health, lived only a month without him.


Decorations by Howard Willard

APHRODITE MEANS DEATH

A condensation of the book by
JOHN APPLEBY



"Aphrodite Means Death" is published by Werner Laurie, London

“HE FACT is, I don't know who I am, or why I am here in Greece. And I don't know who the people are who want to kill me, or what it is I ought to give them.” This is the desperate confession the Englishman makes to the American girl with whom he becomes involved, by accident, in an adventure of heroic and deadly dimensions.

For against the brilliantly presented background of present day Athens, a dark and furious battle is being fought to restore to its original perfection the most famous piece of sculpture in the world—the Venus de Milo.

The enemy is subtle, ferocious, and unknown, and the reader is swept along on a mounting wave of excitement to a climax that is as chilling as it is startling.

But *Aphrodite Means Death* is not only a unique story of high adventure and suspense. Its literary excellence puts it in the rank of top flight novels.

Sunlight on the Island

CHAPTER 1

SHE WAS standing on the hill in the pinewood looking down at the sea. In the morning sun it rippled a deep, lazy blue, sensuous and warm with life. The pine needles were crisp under her sandals and the air was full of their antiseptic scent. Then the rifle cracked.

It sounded near and made her jump. Some farmer or one of the hairy shepherds was firing at a wild dog. She had heard the island was infested with them, and in the hills beyond the little town the men stalked and shot the animals as they had once stalked and shot the Germans.

The second crack was sharper and with it was a whine. From the tree trunk in front of her a white chip jerked through the air. The girl went down quickly, grubbing into the ground with her nails and feeling the pine needles sharp against her forearms.

"Can you move over here, do you think? But don't stand up."

The voice came from her right. It did not occur to her to wonder that it spoke English. Rolling round on her shoulder she perceived a hollow, half-overgrown with grass and bushes.

"I'll try." Her arms stretched forward and heaved, and she could feel her frock rucking up. A brown arm reached out of the long grass and took her hand, hauling her down the slope.

"You can sit up if you want to. Out there your white dress was conspicuous."

He was crouching on one knee and looking intently up the hill. His khaki drill shirt was stained with sweat and the grey flannels were old. In his hand a revolver dangled loosely.

"Conspicuous? He wasn't firing at me."

He considered the statement seriously. "No, I don't think so. At me; but he doesn't know just where I am. We had better not talk so loudly."

The rifle cracked again, and this time she saw the puff of smoke.

The man was behind the red rock just below the brow of the hill. Her companion glanced round. "Just behind you is the water-course. You needn't crawl, but keep as low as you can. Follow it for a quarter of a mile and I'll join you under the bridge." He turned his attention to the red rock.

It was clear that he expected to be obeyed without question. She looked at him curiously for a moment, but he did not turn round. Very well; there was time enough. She braced herself cautiously on her toes and bent low.

The bed of the stream was dry and the banks were smooth. Here she could walk upright, picking her way downhill over the scoured stones. The gully wound and twisted and it would emerge somewhere near the little harbour. Here was the bridge.

It was no more than a couple of planks across shaky uprights, hardly wide enough to take a loaded mule. Slivers of sunlight came down through the cracks, splitting the shadow into patterns. The girl leaned against the bank, grateful for the shade.

Whatever happens in Greece, the knowing ones said, it has one quality: it is unexpected. She had accepted this when she took the Athens job, confident that three years in the army had smoothed away her capacity for surprise. But surely this was straining her *sang-froid* too far.

The man was a long time in coming. When she saw him stride round the bend she gave him a friendly wave but he did not respond. The butt of the revolver stuck out of his trouser pocket. From his shirt he took a packet of cigarettes and lit one.

"May I have one?"

"Yes." It was a simple statement without any conventional apology. As he struck a match he looked at her thoughtfully, as though only now had she crossed his consciousness as something to be considered. Plucking a thorn from her frock the girl felt slightly foolish, but kept her temper.

"Did you find him?"

"He went away. We are all right here, in public." He nodded to where a barefooted boy was approaching the bridge, driving half a dozen goats in front of him.

For something to say she asked, "Is it always as dangerous as this to meet you?" The words were fatuous and she wished she could recall them, but he pondered the question gravely.

"On the island, no. This is only the second time since then."

There were limits to nonchalance. Startled, she asked, "You mean it has happened before?"

He looked at his wrist watch and straightened up. "Only once. Paul will wonder what has happened to me."

With reason, she thought. She scrambled up the bank after him. "If you can direct me to the village . . ."

"This way. It passes my house." He strode ahead.

She couldn't help saying, "Will you please tell me who was shooting at you, and why?"

"I don't know." There was a note of polite regret, as though she had asked the time, and his watch had stopped.

"You don't know who it was?"

"Nor why."

"You don't seem to care, either."

"Yes, I care. It is most disagreeable, but I can't give you an explanation. Except that the shooting had nothing to do with you. No doubt you realize that already."

"If unknown people go about taking pot shots at you, why don't you go to the police?"

"This is Greece, Miss Arden. Pot shots don't carry quite the same value as they do at home. Comparatively speaking, it's no more serious than a boy throwing stones."

He knew her name. But that was not surprising. The arrival of the English miss had buzzed round the island within a few hours, and he could not have failed to hear it. But it added to the list of disadvantages under which she laboured.

"Even in Greece, Mr. . . . You haven't mentioned your name."

"My name. It's Robert Scrivener." He paused as though for a comment. "And this is where I live."

It was a two-story house of mellow stone with wide shuttered windows, built to let in the air and keep out the sun. It overlooked

the sea, and behind it the pines sloped up to the brow of the hill. A neat garden, full of gaudy flowers, was split by gravel paths. The only remarkable feature was that round the whole perimeter and even on the gate was a tangle of barbed wire.

"A relic of the occupation," he said. "The island lies on the route to Piraeus, and the German ack-ack commander lived here. I keep the wire as a kind of souvenir."

There was a sudden noise from the garden and a sound of barking, as two large Alsatian dogs bounded to the gate. A voice behind them called, "Down, Frankie. Johnnie, you fool. It's only Robert." The dogs pawed the inside of the gate.

The man with them was bigger than Scrivener and fairer, his straight blond hair brushed neatly from a brick-red face. He hauled back the dogs and unlatched the gate. As he saw the girl his eyes grew alert, and then he smiled pleasantly.

"So you ran into Robert. You're Jane Arden. Do come in."

"Thank you, but I'm on my way to the village for lunch."

He ignored the cool distance in her voice and said briskly, "Robert is an absent-minded devil, and that's why he didn't ask you to lunch here. We don't often have visitors, so please will you? I'm Paul Saxton, in case you didn't know."

"I didn't."

"I thought you might have heard of us in the village. Anyway, it's much too far to walk back in the sun."

He looked inquiringly at Scrivener, who said awkwardly, "We'd be glad if you would stay." Scrivener held the gate open.

"Very well. Thank you." He latched the gate, and she noticed that there was no outside handle. Short of climbing the wire no one could get in without rousing someone in the house.

He led the way up the path to the French windows and pulled open the long shutters. Inside it was cool and dim, and after the glare of the sun it was a moment before she could see the table was set with two places for lunch. Scrivener indicated an armchair and said, "If you'll wait a moment I'll tell Katrina."

Stretching in the cool comfort of the chair Jane was glad she had stayed. It was pleasant to think that the hot, dusty walk back

was not necessary; and it would be more pleasant still to find out something about this household.

Scrivener came back. "I *think* Katrina understood me," he said doubtfully. The revolver had gone, and he seemed more at ease.

"Did you walk far?" Paul asked.

"Not far. It was too warm to go far."

"And too exciting," said Jane.

Saxton looked at her questioningly and across to Scrivener. He was sprawling in a low chair but she noted his eyes again held that air of alertness. He said, "Not Boris the bandit?"

"I didn't see him," said Scrivener.

"And who," said Jane firmly, "is Boris the bandit?"

Saxton's face darkened. "I'm going to settle that gentleman."

The cook came in, a tiny woman with ragged grey hair. She bobbed a curtsy to Jane and began to lay a third place. Saxton said something in Greek and she answered in a dry, cracked voice.

"Fish," he translated. "Red mullet. I hope you aren't tired of it, but groceries from the mainland are limited."

"I like it very much. Please tell me about Boris the bandit—if that is his name."

"We call him that."

"Boris isn't a Greek name."

"Bulgarian, the traditional enemy. Anyone you dislike you call a Bulgarian. It's the final insult. Boris is probably as Greek as Katrina, some local loonie. They exist, especially among the older resistance men. After being hunted by the Nazis for years, tortured when they were caught and starving when they weren't, it's not surprising. The German commandant lived here. It's possible that some crazy guerrilla thinks the war is still on and carries on a one-man campaign."

Scrivener, who had been staring at the floor, moved restlessly. "I was trying to persuade Miss Arden to forget the whole thing."

Saxton got up. She noticed he rose from the low chair in one movement and without using his arms as levers. When he spoke his words were casual.

"That's hardly to be expected. I take it Boris popped off at you, and Miss Arden was in the way. Her curiosity is natural."

"I'm so glad you agree."

"But first lunch." The cook appeared with a platter of steaming fish and a bowl of green salad. Saxton hustled them into their places, trying hard, she guessed, not to show his relief at the diversion. Scrivener ate in the same way he did everything else—absently, as though his mind was nagged by some distant problem that he could not come close to.

Saxton remained at his ease but behind the small talk she could detect that watchfulness and a sense of purpose.

His questioning sounded not more than conventional interest in a compatriot but she sensed he was weighing her answers. Though she could not know his reason she did know what he was doing, and it amused her. To test whether she was right she once or twice gave an answer that was deliberately vague. He did not press the question; but later the talk drifted back to it.

If I had anything to conceal, she thought, I should be worried. As it is, the worries are theirs. Scrivener can't hide it, and Saxton doesn't hide it well enough.

Having nothing to conceal that could possibly interest them, she talked freely. She had been in Athens three months, a secretary in the London-Greek Tobacco Corporation. She loved the country and surely this island, only three hours away from Athens across the blue Aegean, was the loveliest place in all Greece.

It was a little rash to travel even this distance alone. She had not realized that outside Athens the traditions of Turkish occupation were strong and woman's place was oriental in everything except wearing the veil. But no matter if the peasants stared at her blonde hair, or spat on the floor as she entered a café, conspicuous as the only woman. She was enjoying her brief holiday.

Saxton listened politely. "And are you staying long?"

"I go back tomorrow."

"So you ran into us on your very last day. A happy accident for us." His tone gave a faint emphasis to the words, but if they had any meaning it was lost on her.

"And what do you do, Mr. Scrivener—I mean when you aren't fighting off bandits?"

He hesitated, and Saxton seemed on the point of speaking for him when he said, "Very little, and you must think I am an idle fellow. But when I get around to it, I'm a journalist."

Scrivener. A journalist. The transparency of it was emphasized by her silence. He went on, "Blame the sun. It dries up any inclination to work."

Saxton had been watching him intently, and now he sat back. It was as though a child had been questioned and had unexpectedly given a satisfactory reply.

Scrivener got up. "Please excuse me now." He went out of the room abruptly.

"Robert isn't himself," Saxton said. "He needs a good rest."

She gathered Paul looked after Scrivener as though he were a child or—the word bubbled up—a lunatic. "And you take care of him, Mr. Saxton?"

"I try to." He too got to his feet. "I must see to the dogs now. If you care to make yourself comfortable for a little while I shall be glad to walk down to the village with you when it's a little cooler." He walked to the window. "Those magazines are a bit out of date, but you won't mind." He loosely closed the long shutters behind him, so that only a shaft of sun shone between them.

Jane sat in an easy chair but did not pick up the magazines. Katrina came in and smiled a greeting through yellow teeth as she began to clear the table.

Saxton was solid and understandable and quite clearly the man in control. But Scrivener? She could see his troubled eyes. Was he a prisoner? A prisoner is not allowed to roam at will, a loaded pistol in his pocket. A fugitive from justice? But justice does not snipe at its quarry from behind rocks.

That left one other explanation, and in support of it she felt certain of one thing. This house, its dogs, and its barbed wire were for him superficial. Somewhere beyond them was a question mark which was bigger, more real, more important.

The problems jostled together and blurred. Outside the shutters

was the murmur of bees. Jane's head sank back on her shoulder. The dazzling afternoon drifted by.

She was English enough to regard the siesta habit as faintly reprehensible, and when she woke her first feeling was one of guilt. She walked to the window and pressed against the shutters. They yielded an inch and no more. The inch was enough to show that the bar on the outside was in place.

She crossed to the door, and it was locked. In a flutter of apprehension she rattled the handle. From the other side came a voice. It was intoning something, a chant, and it was Scrivener. Jane opened her mouth to call and then listened. The voice went on in a monotone, meaningless and vaguely horrible.

"Ealing, Lambeth, Hornsey, Islington, Wandsworth, Willesden, Richmond, Chelsea, Kew . . ."

CHAPTER 2

THE MENACE of the house was strong upon her, and the shadowy room had become a prison. Jane felt her muscles tighten and a scream welled up in her throat. With an effort she held it back. Behind her panic a small voice was telling her not to give way to hysteria, not to be a fool. She rattled the handle and paused to get command of her voice before calling out.

The chant broke off and was followed by a shuffling sound. Then the lock clicked, and Jane pulled open the door. Scrivener looked at her in bewilderment, his eyes blinking like those of a man who had just waked up.

"Miss Arden. You were calling me?" He looked down at her hand, still on the handle. "It was locked. I can't think how. Perhaps Katrina, or I may have forgotten. . . ." He gave a rueful smile. "You must be very angry. I ought to apologize."

"Not only the door." She stood aside to admit him to the room and turned towards the fastened window.

Fastened? She started back in surprise. The sun was streaming through the wide open shutters and past the silhouette of a man, feet straddled and hands on hips. Saxton.

"A nice siesta, Miss Arden? I looked in earlier but it seemed a shame to disturb you." She detected amusement in his tone.

"I'm so sorry I fell asleep, but I was paid out for it. I had a bad dream. I dreamed that I was locked in."

"That's interesting. When Robert dreams it's about a car crash that's always happening to him."

"And you?"

"I don't dream at all," he said. "Shall we have some tea?"

"No, thank you. I must go back now."

Saxton clearly expected no other reply. "I must go, too. What about you, Robert?"

"Yes, I'll come along."

They moved into the garden and down to the gate. Saxton closed it behind them, saying, "This way."

The path was steep and rough. Round the bend they came to an orange grove with ladders leaning against the taller trees. Women in baggy aprons and with scarves wound over their heads were picking the fruit and loading it into wicker baskets. Brown children hauled the baskets to the road and hitched them to the lean flanks of the donkeys. A whack and a shout, and the donkeys moved off alone down the path to the harbour.

As the three of them went past, the work stopped and everyone gaped unabashed at the fair-haired English girl in her outrageously immodest clothes.

They reached the corner of the broader cross-street that ran down to the quay. Jane held out her hand. "I'm going back to Athens in the morning, so in case I don't see you again. thank you for having me."

They shook hands. "I hope we'll meet again," said Saxton. Scrivener said, "Good-bye," and turned away. She watched them as they walked on. Scrivener was talking hard, with more animation than she had yet seen in him.

Jane went through the side door of the little inn and up the rickety stairs to her room. It was still hot, and she stretched out gratefully on the bed. Her eyes ranged idly from the discoloured ceiling to the washbowl in the corner. By it was a chair, and on

the chair a towel covered her suitcase to form an improvised table. Her toilet things were laid out neatly on it—soap dish, folded face-cloth, eau de cologne, nailbrush, hairbrush, toothbrush.

Toothbrush. The toothbrush lay parallel with the edge of the case. Always.

But it didn't. It wasn't there. She got up to make sure.

Mother Rena, the housekeeper, had mislaid it, perhaps, in straightening the room. But the room had been swept before she went out this morning. And that meant . . .

Hurriedly she piled the toilet things in the basin and whipped off the cloth. The case was still locked. Her handbag lay where she had left it when she started on her walk. It looked undisturbed. The roll of money was there, and her keys. She unlocked the case with a click.

That, too, appeared normal. The clothes were folded as she had left them, and the two books were in the right-hand corner. Article for article the case was as she remembered it. But the composite effect was wrong. Whoever had been there had an excellent memory for detail but could not supply that touch of her own.

Thoughtfully she took out a fresh frock. She saw the toothbrush had fallen in the corner behind the chair and picked it up. Someone was after something, and in the newspaper phrase, "Robbery was not the motive."

But what was he about, whoever he was? Secret documents? The plans of the hidden treasure? Blueprints of the newest bomber? Jane thought of her blameless career. Not once had mysterious strangers confided in her secrets of international moment. And if they had, it was unlikely she would bring the information away on a week-end trip.

Changed and cool, she made up her face and went out of the room. The main staircase led down to the café. Mother Rena was talking across the zinc bar to Alex. He turned as she came in and grinned.

"Alex," she said carefully, "has anyone called to see me this afternoon?"

"I don't know. I am down at caïque, loading oranges.

Rena—"He spoke in Greek. The woman shrugged violently and launched into what was evidently a torrent of denial.

"She say no, miss. But I think maybe a little while she sleep, eh?"

Jane thought so, too. In the heat of the afternoon Mother Rena abandoned the café and stretched out on the veranda in the rear. The place remained wide open. Anyone could slip through the side door.

"You know the Englishmen, Alex? They live in the villa up the hill."

"I have seen them. Major Saxton I know. Sometimes he comes with me to Piraeus. The other I do not know, except I cannot pronounce his name."

"Have they lived here long?"

Alex explained at great length. The two men had appeared together about five months ago. The villa at once took their fancy and they rented it for a year. But they had refused to take down the barbed wire left by the departing Germans. And the two Alsatian dogs had not escaped notice.

"Why the dogs?" Jane asked.

Alex rolled his eyes and shrugged his shoulders. Doubtless they had enemies. What man had not? If so, they were properly reserved about it and did not bother their neighbours. The war had produced many unaccountable things, and a sensible man did not ask questions of no concern to him. The two men were well liked. They had money and paid a fair price for everything. Moreover, Major Saxton was already known. Several of the villagers had spent the war on the mainland, fighting in guerrilla bands after the collapse of the army. They had come back to the island with stories of Englishmen who had appeared among them with pockets full of golden sovereigns and plans for the most efficient way of annoying the enemy. Among such Englishmen Saxton was a warrior terrible in battle. No train was so thoroughly destroyed as the one he wrecked. No ambush was so deadly. After the war he was not seen again until he arrived at the island with the Englishman of the abominable name.

Jane made allowance for country exaggeration. But even so, the tale was impressive. From what she had seen of Saxton, he was the man to enjoy a personal war. He was the type who put advertisements in *The Times*: "Demobilized Officer, go anywhere, do anything, if strictly legitimate." Though she fancied there would be a mental reservation on his "legitimate" clause.

But this took her nowhere along the road to accounting for Scrivener. Of him they knew nothing. Now she was going to leave the island, and with it a whole cluster of loose ends that would never be tied up.

CHAPTER 3

HERS WERE not the only questions. In the guarded house above the village late that night, Saxton lay naked and sticky under his sheet and gazed at the dim ceiling.

Locking her in had been a risk and he had got back barely in time. But there was no other way, because she might have taken it into her head to walk back in the heat of the afternoon. And he had to be sure of that undisturbed ten minutes.

Her room had yielded nothing, which was what he expected, but that did not clear her. If she had been detailed to make a reconnaissance she was unlikely to bring with her anything incriminating. And the meeting with Robert, apparently accidental, could have been managed even without the shooting.

The night was still, uneasily still. Something was missing that should be there and it came to him what it was. He lay motionless and breathed slowly, all his senses alert, and then he was sure. Through the open window he ought to hear the snuffling of the dogs as they prowled round the house.

He slid out of bed and moving by touch pulled on a pair of trousers and a dark sweater. His feet slipped into rubber shoes, and he took the little pistol from under his pillow.

Across the passage Scrivener's door was ajar, and his breathing came heavily. Saxton went downstairs, slowly and hugging the wall. The closed shutters of the living-room threw it almost com-

pletely into darkness and he stood motionless for several minutes until he was certain it was empty. Then the kitchen and pantry.

No one was in the house. He would have to go out.

He groped in the warm ashes of the stove and closing his eyes smeared the muck on his face. However faint the light from the stars and the slice of moon, he did not want his head to show up as white as a turnip. The pantry window faced the deepest shadow. He slipped the catch and eased the window open gently. Over the garden silence hung like a cloud. The sill pressed into his belly as he doubled over it and dropped out on his arms. In five seconds he was yards away and motionless.

As his eyes became focused to the night he found the light was stronger than he liked, and there was no breath or sigh of breeze to cover an incautious movement. But at least he knew the ground. The bush looming in front of him was one of a line that would take him to the gate, his first objective.

Somewhere ahead he heard breathing. Unhurriedly he edged forward and at the edge of the lawn saw a lumpish shape which heaved gently. One of the dogs. It was unconscious and snorting through its mouth. As he reached the dog it gave a twitch and Saxton's hand touched something slippery. He picked up a chunk of raw meat. It had an odd smell.

He got away quickly. Beyond the wire a man would be waiting for the dog to die. Saxton wriggled into the shadow of the house and here he found the other dog. Dead, this time.

He had covered half the grounds and in another twenty minutes he learned there was no one in the remainder. The man was outside, and it was not likely that he would wait much longer. He must go out after the fellow. The place to do it was on the dark side of the house opposite the pantry window, where he had sometimes seen the dogs digging along the wire.

The baked soil crumbled under his fingers, and there was a six-inch gap up to the lowest strand. The wire could be pressed up another few inches. He began to claw the earth away. He must be quite sure the gap was wide enough to get through in one movement. The thought of being stuck made his skin crawl.

At length the shallow trench seemed enough, but he scraped for another five minutes to make sure. Now for it. His toes got a grip, a heave, and he was through. Grabbing his gun he gave a quick roll and lay still. The sweat was running in trickles down the dirt on his face, and he tried not to pant.

There were three sides of the house to cover, ignoring the bare ground in front of the gate. If the man were keeping the place under observation he would not be more than ten yards back. Testing each step before he let his weight rest on it, Saxton moved from tree to tree, stopping every few paces to listen.

Two sides of the house yielded nothing. Here was the third and this must be it. The ground was rockier, and the trees were interspersed with low, spiky bushes. Almost any move at all would give a betraying rustle, but it must be done.

Then he saw him. He was lying behind a small boulder, his legs in the shadow of a bush and his head clear in the moonlight. He was staring intently at the window of Scrivener's bedroom. By his side Saxton saw the glint of a rifle barrel.

The man fumbled with something, and Saxton froze. There was a sudden scratch and a spurt of light. The idiot was smoking.

The cigarette glowed faintly against his cupped hand, brighter each time he drew on it. He smoked fast, as though nerving himself for something, and pinched out the cigarette halfway through. Then he rolled over, the rifle cuddled to his shoulder and pointed straight at the dark square of Scrivener's window.

Saxton struck and the night was suddenly rent with a wild yell. Inside Scrivener's window came the faint glow of a match which widened to a yellow light as the lamp was lit. At the window in silhouette stood Scrivener, a target which a shepherd boy could not miss with a rook gun.

"It's all right, Robert," Saxton called. "It's me—Paul. Come and open the gate." The fellow was stirring and groaning now, his hands clutched to the matted hair on his skull.

Saxton picked up the rifle and gave the man a sharp kick in the ribs. His toe hit something hard. From inside the fellow's shirt he dragged an old-fashioned revolver. That, plus a curved knife



stuck through his belt, completed the armament.

"Get up. Quickly. And march." The man stumbled to his feet, still groaning, and Saxton nudged him. Scrivener, in pyjamas and slippers, held the gate open, the padlock dangling in his hand. When they were inside, he snapped it back in place.

"I suppose this is our friend Boris?"

The Greek sprawled on the divan in the lounge. His only clothes were a ragged shirt, trousers and rope shoes. Saxton went through his pockets and found a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches. Little money, no papers. Quite young, Saxton thought; not more than twenty-two. And thin. The brown cheeks were hollow.

"Know him?"

Scrivener was looking at the man intently, his brow furrowed. "I haven't seen him before. Or if I have, I don't remember."

"Then I'll find out." He spoke in Greek, quietly. "I want to know your name and where you came from."

The young man sat upright. His eyes lingered on the weapons. "My name is Stepanos, and I come from nowhere."

Saxton said, "I will tell you what I know of you. You are from the city. You were sent to this island to kill my friend." He lit a cigarette. "I now ask you to tell me who sent you."

Saxton reached out and took the Greek by the wrist. His cigarette hung, as though by accident, a fraction of an inch from the brown skin. The youth gazed ahead blankly and waited. It did not occur to him to cry out. These were his captors, and they did with him as they pleased.

The only one of the three to show emotion was Scrivener. His eyes were bright, and his breath came fast. Saxton said, "Answer me this. Is my friend your personal enemy?"

The Greek thought for a moment, searching for some hidden trap. Then he answered, "No."

"How much were you given to kill him?"

Again the pause. "One hundred thousand drachmas."

The man sat stolidly, braced for whatever came next. He would not be frightened.

"You have received the money?"

"A little of it. It cost money to come here, and I had none."

"And now you will never receive the rest."

"That is true."

"You need money?"

"Only God does not need money."

Saxton had made up his mind. He got up. "I am going to set you free, Stepanos. You will return in the boat that sails at dawn and you will tell your employer you have failed. You will not collect any money, and I fear your friends will make jokes about you."

"They would not dare."

"They will say: 'There goes Stepanos who tried to kill an Englishman and made a mess of it.'"

"It is not as you say. Only two men know, and they are not Greek."

"I know," Saxton said gently. "I also know you come from Piraeus." The man's eyes flickered, confirming the guess. "It will not be hard to find out everything about Stepanos—where he sleeps, the cafés where he plays dice and does much talking." The Greek looked sullen. "You are a business man. This transaction has gone wrong and can do you great harm. A man can lose everything else, but not his good name."

Scrivener said irritably, "You're doing a devil of a lot of talking. Find out who paid him."

Over his shoulder Saxton said, "Can you put your hand on a hundred thousand dracks?"

"To pay this crook? You're crazy."

"Get it, Robert, will you?"

"All right." He went out sulkily.

Saxton was gambling on the prestige attached to violence and the fear of mockery. He was aware that he was still smothered in ashes and that they itched abominably. He lit another cigarette, and seeing the look of the Greek, gave him one.

"I am a man of sentiment and I have no wish to make a young man ridiculous. But I am also a business man, as you are, and I pay for what I want." He broke off as Robert came back and

tossed a bundle of notes on to the table. There was a silence. Then Stepanos said, "There is a large man, young, who is English, and a dark man, older, who is not. Perhaps he is German. I do not know their names. When I return we are to meet at the *taverna* of the Five Brothers."

Saxton handed over the money and the man stuffed it in his shirt. He rose with dignity and gave a short bow. Saxton escorted him to the gate and watched him set off at a loping run.

CHAPTER 4

JANE AND Stepanos were not the only passengers from the island to board the caique for Piraeus, the port of Athens, the following morning. Saxton came aboard unobtrusively and blended into the surging mass of people and animals on deck. When he disembarked he was of two minds.

If he backed his judgment of Stepanos, he could forget about him till noon; but it would be safer still to trail him. As the Greek crossed the road and sat down at a café table Saxton lounged by the wall of the quay and considered what to do.

Someone touched his arm and he looked round. The wizened face of Alcibiades grinned at him—Alcibiades, whose resounding name went so ill with his shrunken frame. They shook hands.

"You are well?"

"I live. It was better when we blew up bridges."

This was a stroke of luck. "Look across the road and you will see a man sitting alone under the blue and white poster. His name is Stepanos and at noon he has a meeting at the *taverna* of the Five Brothers. Observe the men he meets and what they say. I shall be at Yannaki's at six-thirty."

"It will cost money to do these things and I have none."

"No man works for love." Saxton gave him some notes. "This evening there will be some more." On the completion of this transaction Saxton had no trouble in getting a lift into Athens.

His next business was the highly illegal matter of changing five

gold sovereigns into nearly a million drachmas. This accomplished, he strolled back towards Constitution Square. As he passed the offices of the London-Greek Tobacco Corporation he wondered again about the Arden girl. But there was no good reason for thinking she was mixed up in the business. To be too suspicious was as bad as being too trusting. He must follow up the Stepanos lead and get back to Robert on the island.

At the British Club it was a little early for lunch but the bar was filling up. The men were mostly young officers wearing familiar badges and divisional signs but without war ribbons. For Saxton it was rather like returning to school after an absence of two or three years. The place was the same, but his associations and memories were different from theirs.

"Paul! You must have a drink with me."

It was Marshall, a colonel in the military police. "You look quite prosperous."

"A little black-marketing helps. I hear there is going to be another purge." Saxton liked to keep up with events.

"Yes . . . keep away from the arcade on Friday."

"I expect to be back on the island by then."

"You still like it?" Marshall regarded Saxton thoughtfully.

"It was peaceful until recently. But they are on to Scrivener now." Saxton's eyes asked a silent question.

"Not a thing, old boy." Marshall sighed. "If you can't find out, how can I?"

"I'm on to something, but now I'll handle it myself."

"If it gets you in a jam, don't come to me and holler copper."

"As I usually do? I won't tell you a thing."

Marshall was suddenly quite serious. "I'll just remind you, Paul. What you call a little black-marketing is none of my business. If you keep it discreet then you can take on the local bobbies in any way you like. And if they toss you in the cooler you can't blame anyone but yourself. But Scrivener—there's more in it than changing the odd sovereign. When you find out what it is—if you find out—you've got to make up your mind. If it's anything that concerns me I shall want to know."

"I'll tell you one thing. He was never in the army."

"Did he say so?"

"My dear chap, I live with him. He doesn't know one army term from another."

"There's still the money. Do you know how much?"

"I changed five this morning, and that makes thirty in three months. Translated into dracks it takes care of us both comfortably. But I don't know how much more there is, or how long it's supposed to last."

"You were better off when you ran errands for the Yank mission."

"That's rude. They call it liaising. I made more, as you say, but it wasn't so . . . interesting. One more point—what can you tell me about a gal called Jane Arden?"

"The blonde? I haven't met her, but she's supposed to be nice. Her trip to your island was just a holiday."

Saxton grinned appreciatively. "I bet you know her passport number and brand of nail polish."

"Not quite that, but if you're still interested I can tell you she's going bathing this afternoon."

THE *Volkswagen* pulled up at the hotel promptly at two. Jane was ready and waiting in the lobby for George Dundas, the tall major who worked in Marshall's office. At this hour the streets were dozing in siesta and they made good speed to Varkiza.

They reached the beach in less than half an hour and found it deserted except for a party of British troops, their brown knees and forearms standing out against their white skin like paint. While Jane changed behind a dune George spread an army blanket and emptied cigarettes from his pockets.

The water was heavy and warm, so warm that there was no sense of shock as they waded in. The brine cushioned them to the surface, spreading a sense of effortless power through their limbs. It must be like this to be disembodied, Jane thought—to turn and roll and drift, with all weight sloughed off.

Lazily she swam inshore, digging her fingers into the soft sand

of the shallows and hauling herself along the last few yards. At the edge she floated on her back, swaying like a water plant. Here the sun struck clear through the placid sea, making it too warm for comfort. She picked her way across the burning sand to the blanket. Already the salt was caking on her limbs with a pleasant tingling. She stooped for the towel to wipe her face.

Something fell out—a piece of folded paper. Without thinking, she opened the note. It was a pencil scrawl, written in a hurry. *Can you make it eight-thirty at the University? I'll send a car for you. Excuse the drama. P. S.*

Now this, she told herself, is quite preposterous. She was not disposed to excuse the drama. Saxton seemed to have been mixed up with intrigue so long that he had lost all sense of normal behaviour. She could not guess how he had arranged to have the note delivered, though obviously it had been slipped into her towel while she was swimming. The way it was phrased implied a change of time, as though some earlier appointment had been arranged. But that was not so. The infuriating part was the cool assumption that she would go.

George was swimming in. Jane tucked the note in her bag and stretched out to receive the sun, her eyes shut. They bathed again before they left, dressed quickly, and got into the car. George was in a hurry. "I have to see the boss at five. Old Marshall is the very devil if he's kept waiting." They roared back at high speed, narrowly missing a cart piled high with green watermelons.

Thinking of the note, Jane felt her anger well up again. The man was impossible.

But naturally, she would have to go.

CHAPTER 5

BY EARLY EVENING it was a little cooler and the pavements and café tables were crowded. This was the fashionable hour for promenading, when the city came alive after its afternoon sleep. Sitting back with his *apéritif* Saxton reflected that for all its European air, Athens was as much of the east as of the west. The

expensive linen suits and silk shirts of the men accentuated the oriental in them, made their gestures and vehement talk larger than life. The women glittered with flamboyant jewellery which competed with the flash of their gold teeth. This year the mode was for a streak of blonde hair across the top of the head, throwing into relief the dark skin and darker eyes.

A beggar shuffled along the pavement and held out his hand in mute appeal. Saxton got up with a leisurely stretch and followed him round the corner, into a dirty wineshop. Alcibiades drank *retsina*, licked his lips, sighed, and turned to his tale.

What it came to was that Stepanos had taken a bus from Piraeus to Athens and arrived at the *taverna* of the Five Brothers just before noon. He sat down outside and ordered wine, Alcibiades sitting strategically two tables away. For an hour they waited philosophically, for it would be unreal to expect a noon appointment to be kept at twelve o'clock. But by one Stepanos was becoming impatient. At length the waiter came to him and jerked his head towards the door. Stepanos went inside. Alcibiades followed him and leaned on the bar, exchanging a greeting with the proprietor. Three yards away Stepanos was at the telephone doing no talking but listening intently. What he heard did not lighten his mood, for his scowl was fiercer than ever. A terrible fellow (sighed Alcibiades) and if he had suspected he was being followed . . . But for an old comrade one must take risks.

"And did he say nothing?" Saxton asked.

"I am an old man and I do not hear very well," Alcibiades said. But he heard well enough the notes rustling in Saxton's hand. His tone brightened. "A few words, however, came to me. He said angrily, 'Very well, seven,' and put back the telephone."

Saxton got up, glancing at his watch. He gave the Greek a hasty handshake and pushed across some money. Alcibiades took the notes with dignity and pushed them under his rags without counting them. His manner made it clear that this was a transaction between gentlemen. The counting would come later.

Well before the evening dinner hour Saxton returned to the *taverna* and found an inside seat half-concealed by the coffee urn

from where he could see more than half of the pavement tables and anyone who came in the door. It was seven-fifteen when Stepanos arrived. He stared round boldly, and gave an elaborate wave to two men sitting at a small outside table. Walking carefully he picked his way between the tables and sat down with a thump.

Saxton had already noted the two men and now he made a more detailed survey. The big fair man, running to fat, was about thirty. Through the glass window it was impossible to distinguish what he said, but his shirt, tie and sports coat were unmistakably English.

Stepanos poured out a flood of words, waving his arms in pantomime. The older man, with cropped dark hair, listened. From the way he gestured it was apparent he spoke little Greek. The Englishman looked bored. But at length Stepanos seemed to convey at least the bare outline of his mission and its failure.

The dark-haired man put a sharp question. The Greek shrugged. Another question, a torrent of explanation; angry interruption, more words. The Englishman pushed back his chair angrily and got up. The other followed suit, and they moved off purposefully. Stepanos sat glowering and with a sudden savage gesture swallowed the remains of their wine.

He doesn't matter any more, Saxton told himself as he got up. But the others . . . It is going to be an interesting evening. He looked at his watch. Plenty of time.

"MISS ARDEN? Hope I'm not late, miss." The burly, red-faced man spoke with a northern accent. "We had a bit of a hold-up on the road." He held open the door of the car. "You know how excited these chaps get."

She said austere,ly, "I was expecting Mr. Saxton."

"He's waiting, miss—place just off Concord Square. He's sorry he couldn't make it."

She got in the car with ill grace and they drove south through the honking traffic. The car pulled up in front of a tall house in the middle of a block of flats.

The driver led the way up to the third floor and let himself in with a key. Jane found herself in a well-appointed lounge. "If you don't mind waiting a minute . . ." He switched on the radio and a throbbing Greek song filled the room as he went through a door at the farther end. Saxton certainly did himself well. The rugs and the leather upholstery were expensive and ostentatious. She found that curiously out of character.

"Good evening."

It made her jump, for she had heard no one come in. The speaker stood for a moment in the doorway and then crossed to switch off the radio. He was a slight man with thin lips, a high narrow forehead, and watchful eyes. He walked with a limp.

"I was expecting someone else," Jane said.

"My name is Kronopoulos, John Kronopoulos." He paused as though for comment. "You may have heard of me."

"You are a friend of Mr. Saxton?"

"I know him, but not intimately. Excuse me." He sat down. "My leg is still troublesome."

With a slight shock she recalled that she had indeed heard of him. His name and photograph had been on the front pages of the newspapers for weeks. The war was over, and memories were growing dim. Collaboration with the ex-enemy might not, after all, be so serious as was once thought. But Kronopoulos had been Minister of Justice under the Germans, and that did require some explanation. There were people, awkward people, who insisted on dragging up stories of hostages, of mass executions. They were so persistent that in the end he was tried for treason.

Kronopoulos argued his own case, and with skill. It was true he had held office and that the Germans had shown brutality. But could he have prevented it, could any man? His purpose (at the risk of misunderstanding) had been to mollify the beast in their midst, and this (he asserted) he had done. But for him the tale of savagery would have been worse, much worse.

Unfortunately not everyone saw it in that light, and an uneducated rabble handled Kronopoulos roughly. He recovered, however, apart from a game leg.

Now he was smiling politely. "I am glad you came, Miss Arden, because I have been anxious to speak to you. Perhaps you can be generous enough to forgive my stratagem? Privacy was essential for what I have to say."

Saxton was not coming. He had nothing to do with it. She went a little cold.

"Please call your driver and ask him to take me back. At once." Her voice was querulous, like a schoolma'am uncertain of her authority.

"It will save a great deal of tedium if we are frank."

Jane jumped to her feet. "Then I'll walk. Good night."

Kronopoulos also got up. He called, "Grigson!" and the driver appeared. Jane tried to conceal her relief.

"Thank you."

"You misunderstand. Grigson, take the car away. I don't want it to be seen standing outside."

"Right, sir." He crossed to the outer door.

Surely the man didn't intend to keep her here? "You, Grigson, or whatever your name is, I've told Mr. Kronopoulos that I'm leaving. Please take me downstairs." The man shuffled. "You heard what I said?"

Kronopoulos smiled. "I'm afraid Grigson does what *I* say."

She said angrily, "You're English, aren't you? I've said I'm going." She walked towards the door.

"Sorry, miss. You'll be all right." It was impossible to get round his burly form. "Just listen to what Mr. Kronopoulos has to say." He went out and the door clicked shut.

"An appeal to patriotism won't do, Miss Arden. Grigson has no love for the British authorities, especially for the army. They treated him shabbily, and he decided to sever relations."

She crossed to the window. "Unless you let me go at once I shall yell my head off."

"Screams attract little notice. Besides, I should stop you. Do sit down and have a cigarette."

She sat down but refused the cigarette. "Am I to regard myself as kidnapped?"

"Dear me, no. When we have had our chat Grigson will drive you home."

"You can ask him to call at the British Embassy on the way."

He found this amusing. "A virtuous complaint? It would mean a lot of questions, Miss Arden, and I feel sure you would find them embarrassing."

Her bewilderment was stronger than her indignation. She said carefully, "You are quite sure you know who I am?"

"Quite sure."

"And," tentatively, "you want me to tell you something."

The thin lips widened in a smile. "Just so."

"What is it, then?" She genuinely wanted to know.

He settled comfortably in his chair. "You know Robert Scrivener. You visited him on his island yesterday."

"I know Paul Saxton, too."

"Saxton?" He snapped his fingers. "Of no importance. But Scrivener . . . I want to know what he gave you and where you have hidden it."

"He gave me nothing. I never saw him before yesterday. I never even heard of him."

His expression said nothing but there was an edge of impatience in his voice. "You ask me to believe you met Scrivener by accident? That you are not accomplices?"

"I am not asking you to believe anything."

"You forget, Miss Arden, the money he has is not his. It was one half of a bargain, and the other half was not kept. It is my belief that Scrivener has passed it to you. If that is so I advise you to give it to me."

It was like walking in a fog. You come to a clear patch and think you know your way and the fog closes in again. Kronopoulos wanted something held by Scrivener, but what?

More important, how was she to convince Kronopoulos that his belief was wild nonsense? Though his features showed no expression his gaze was bleak.

She said, "You do believe that I am an accomplice, as you call it, of Mr. Scrivener, and that we have something to hide. Very

well, tell me what it is you think he passed on to me."

Kronopoulos shrugged. "I am not the main party in this, and an agent is not told everything. My employer did not tell me what this thing was, nor why it is so valuable to him. But Scrivener knows because he had it. And I believe you have it now. My task is to get it back."

Jane got up. "You'd really better try someone else. If you'll call your driver I'd like to go to the British Embassy."

The door swung open, almost knocking her down, and two men came in. They looked angry and pushed past her with hardly a glance. "I should have done it myself." The fair-haired one slumped in a chair and scowled. The other man shook hands formally with Kronopoulos before answering. "That would have been impossible. At least Stepanos could move about unnoticed, even if his aim was bad. But for an Englishman who speaks no Greek . . ." He appealed to Kronopoulos. Jane judged he might be German or Dutch.

Kronopoulos gave them cigarettes. "It was a bad idea and that is why it failed. Miss Arden, may I present my colleagues? If you know their names I need not mention them, and if you do not, then it is wiser not to know."

More riddles. But this time Jane was not the only one in the dark. The Englishman looked up, startled, and Kronopoulos explained. "By a coincidence Miss Arden has just visited the island and Mr. Scrivener. She insists that her trip was no more than an innocent holiday." He smiled unpleasantly. "She is not a very clever young lady, because even now she does not see how dangerous it would be for her if she were speaking the truth. If Miss Arden *is* in with Scrivener, she will not dare complain to the authorities that she was brought here by false pretences. But if she is innocent, that is the first thing she will do. Naturally I could not allow that. You see the alternatives, Miss Arden?"

Her expression must have given away that she understood. So did the Englishman. He said heavily, "You're in a bit of a spot, my dear, and I'm not sure how much of it is your own fault. Suppose you tell us."

She was trembling and furious at her lack of control. They all looked at her intently, which was why they did not see that the door behind them had opened.

Saxton said pleasantly, "What do they want to know?"

All three swung round but only Kronopoulos acted. His right hand flew inside his jacket. There was a sharp crack and he jerked as though on wires. The shoulder of his linen suit grew red.

"Any more for any more? Keep your hands in front of you." The pistol dangled from Saxton's fingers. "Yes, you, too." This to Jane. "I can't answer for these two characters, Miss Arden, but your pal Kronopoulos is *not* my favourite Greek." He came in and sat on the edge of the table. "I want to know quite a lot of things: why you two birds sent Stepanos to snipe at Robert Scrivener; where *you* come in, Kronopoulos; and what *you* expect to get out of it, Miss Arden."

Her indignation reduced her to a splutter. "You think I'm in league with these people? If you'd been a minute earlier you'd have heard them threaten me for being on *your* side!"

Kronopoulos was clutching his shoulder as the stain spread. "Mr. Saxton, please allow me to attend to this."

"If you bleed to death I shan't even come to the funeral. But you can answer some of the questions." As though in answer Kronopoulos rolled on to the floor in a faint. Still watching the others, Saxton reached down and groped for the gun in the holster.

"That's a pity," Saxton said. He looked at the other two with calculation and decided they did not know enough to be of use. "The questions will have to wait until your friend comes round. At least I know now where to come and ask. Good night." He backed to the door.

Jane gave a cry of horror. "You can't leave me here! Listen, just for one moment, *listen!*"

Inspiration came, and heedless of the levelled gun her hand went to the pocket of her skirt. She spread the note on the table and he contrived to read it without losing sight of the two men. It seemed to amuse him, but he was convinced. "Move round the wall till you get to the door and wait for me outside."

She edged her way round so as not to come between Saxton and the two men. They stood loosely, arms half-raised, ready for any mistake. Saxton backed out and turned the key.

On the landing below Grigson was huddled in a corner, breathing heavily. Saxton hustled the girl down the remaining stairs. When they reached the street they ran until they reached the corner and could ease up among the boulevard strollers.

Jane was getting her breath back. She managed to say accusingly, "You let them go."

"Kronopoulos is unconscious, and the others are just stooges."

"But they're criminals," she protested. "Murderers, maybe. We ought to go to the police."

"What do we tell them?"

"For a start, Kronopoulos kidnapped me."

"He used a trick to get you to his flat. I butted in and shot him. He should be the one to call the police."

"You're being ridiculous."

"We'll talk about it when we've had some dinner. You must be starving."

"Dinner!" It was an explosion. She recalled her dignity and said icily, "If your mind runs only on food, please don't let me keep you from it."

"Oh, very lofty." He kept his face straight. "It isn't very far."

After all she *was* hungry. She allowed herself to be led.

CHAPTER 6

IT WAS below street level with sand on the floor and a long stove sizzling at the far end. Workmen sat round marble-topped tables playing dice, and in a corner a man blared on an accordion. The proprietor rushed from behind the stove, apron flapping, and led them to a table. There was an animated discussion over the smudgy menu.

Jane fiddled with a fork. "Kronopoulos said you were not important. He said the one who mattered was Scrivener."

"Well, I work for him."

She was startled. "I didn't know."

"You thought I was his keeper?"

"You look after him, and tonight you looked after me. It must be a great comfort to you to know you are so resourceful." The dig was childish but it pleased her. "Even if you are working in the dark."

He poured out some wine without answering

"You *are* in the dark, aren't you?" Jane said.

"There are some things I don't know. Kronopoulos will be a help."

"You don't know why he wants to kill Mr. Scrivener. You don't know what he wants from him. It must handicap you."

"Regard me as a hired muscle man. What Kronopoulos said is true. I'm paid to look after Robert and I like doing it anyway. He needs help, and when he wants to tell me why, he will. Shall I tell you something? When the showdown comes he's not going to need me. He's going to handle it himself, and neither you nor I will be any use at all."

Jane ate in silence. She had nothing in common with Saxton, which made it the more curious that she had the same feeling. For all his irritating competence he was essentially a background figure. Only Scrivener could explain Stepanos, the weasel-like Kronopoulos and behind them the shadowy figure who had set them in motion. Somewhere there was a key, and only Scrivener had it.

She said, "You haven't told me how you came across Kronopoulos."

"By following his two pals. By the way, what are you going to do about Kronopoulos?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet."

"You can go to the Greek police, and they will get excited and that will be the end of it. Or you can go to the British Embassy, and they will listen politely and not believe a word. Or you can go to Army Intelligence, and they will thank you very much, and you'll hear nothing."

"That's three."

"The fourth is that you can keep quiet about the whole business. They know now that you aren't working with Robert, just as I know now that you aren't working with Kronopoulos. So you're in the clear, with nothing to worry about."

"Why are you so anxious for me to keep quiet?"

"My dear girl . . ." There was an edge on his voice. "I don't give a damn who you go to or what you say. I've merely sketched out the reception you'll get. If you want to make a fool of yourself, that's your affair."

"And that is your only reason—concern for me?"

Unexpectedly he smiled. "You're right. There *is* another, but it's not easy to make plain. It's tied up with what I was saying earlier. This is Robert's war, and though I am in it, and you nearly got into it, essentially it's a *private* war."

She paused before putting her next question, and then spoke slowly. "Is that a polite way of saying he is a crook? Doesn't he *want* the police to help him?"

Saxton was paying the bill, and the proprietor bowed them up the stone steps to the street.

As they emerged there was a transformation. Beyond the coloured neon lights, behind the overhead street lamps loomed the dark mass of the Acropolis. As though their appearance was the signal, there suddenly appeared on top of it in white filigree the slender lines of the Parthenon floating, it seemed, in space—remote, pure, and perfect. Jane caught her breath at the loveliness of it, and Saxton, too, gazed in silence. So cunningly placed were the lights that they seemed to give no ray, no dazzle. The columns glowed white as though from within. Jane had seen it many times but the enchantment never failed.

The proprietor, at the door with them, grinned proudly. "Good, eh." It was all part of the service, his manner said. Saxton gave him a light shove that sent him staggering down the steps and they walked in silence.

She had forgotten her question until he answered it.

"A crook? I don't know at all, and I don't care. I know nothing whatever about Robert."



CHAPTER 7

IT COULDN'T be so, and yet she was sure there was no mistake. He was standing in the shadow of a pillar and watching her.

In spite of the heat of the afternoon there was a slight breeze over the Acropolis. The whitewashed city below baked in the sun, and away to the east the sea shone like a blue mirror, with Salamis a purple smudge. Jane stood on the terrace surrounding the Temple of Wingless Victory and gazed over the sheer drop. From this spot the men of Athens had seen their fleet return after the Persian ships were destroyed. Here the civilization of three thousand years was planted like a strong tree.

At this hour there were few people on the hill and Jane was thankful she had obeyed the impulse of last night. She could think and dream and soothe away in the vast peace of this loveliness the perplexities that beset her.

And now all peace was gone. He was looking at her intently and he was Robert Scrivener. She turned and walked towards him. He made as though to shrink out of sight.

"I didn't expect to see you again so soon, Mr. Scrivener."

His eyes had that cloudy look of doubt that she had seen before,

like the eyes of a dog that is not sure it understands. He said defensively, "I haven't told Paul Saxton I'm here. I promised to stay on the island but I had to come."

"Up here? It's very beautiful."

He said vaguely, "Beautiful, of course. Does it remind you of an apple tree?" He caught her stare. "No, please, but does it? Every time I come here I think of an apple tree."

"It doesn't remind me of anything, because there's no other place in the least like it."

"Not in *looks*." He was impatient.

"Do you come here often?"

"Whenever I leave the island."

"Perhaps you feel safe here."

"It's not that. I'm not safe anywhere." It was a simple statement, and behind it she was aware suddenly of a waste of loneliness and misery. It was her first real glimpse of what the man thought and how he felt, and what she saw at that moment was more frightening than anything that had gone before. He was a man utterly cut off and alone. For the first time since she had met him in the pinewood, bewilderment gave way to pity.

He sensed the change and looked at her quickly. What he saw made a gleam of hope come into his brooding eyes.

Jane said gently, "If it would help you to talk, I should like to listen."

"Would you? I haven't talked to anyone, not even to Paul. Though I talk to myself, of course."

"I heard you. It didn't make any sense then, but it does now."

There was genuine pleasure in his smile. "There are twenty-eight boroughs in London and one of them must mean something. I'm quite certain about London, but that's all."

"And you're certain that someone wants to kill you, aren't you? Can you tell me why?"

"I'd like to. But the fact is . . ." He hesitated and the look of doubt returned. She met his eyes gravely and said nothing. His gaze shifted to the blue distance of the sea. "The fact is, I don't know. I don't know who I am, or why I am here in Greece, or

where the money came from. And I don't know who the people are who want to kill me, or what it is I ought to give them."

Darkness in the City

CHAPTER 8

SCRIVENER began to talk, marshalling the significant facts and those fugitive details which some day might be significant. . . .

He had awakened with a headache that threatened to split his skull. It was dark and the cobblestones of the alley dug into his back in knobs. He lurched to his feet, clutched the wall for support and stood swaying. His hands made brushing motions over his clothes. He couldn't go back like this and face them.

Face them? Go back where? The hotel, of course. He shook his head in irritation. Through the singing in his ears he groped for the name. It was the big place that faced the square, and opposite it an illuminated sign advertised gramophone records.

At the end of the alley he blinked in the light. The face of his watch was broken and the hands stood at a quarter past ten. It could not be very much later than that because the streets were still full. A girl brushed by on the arm of a British corporal. The man was laughing and with his free arm was trying to express the meaning of what he said. It was extraordinary how the troops made themselves clear on half a dozen words of Greek.

Why, yes, Greek. This was Athens, wasn't it? Laboriously he worked it out. Very well, then, they spoke Greek. Do I speak Greek? *Kali merassis*—that means "Good morning."

He was fighting a mounting sense of fear. It would be all right back at the hotel. This way . . . he was certain it was this way. When he got there it would all become clear again. Along this way. Yes! There was the illuminated sign and the little dog peering into the horn. And this was the hotel.

The small triumph gave him a thrill of hope. He breathed more easily and stood at the corner to take stock. There was a lump under his hair but he could feel no blood. His hands were filthy and there was a small rip in his trousers.

Trousers. He moved away from the corner and in the shelter of the wall went through his pockets. Handkerchief, comb, fountain pen, wallet. That was it—wallet. He rummaged through it hastily. There was a bundle of money, Greek notes and several English pounds. And not a thing besides. Not a letter, not an envelope even, not a scrap of paper of any kind.

With a new desperation he grasped at the shreds of memory. His only certainty was the hotel. He was staying there. Surely he was staying there, or why should he tell himself so?

There were several people in the lobby. Suppose someone spoke to him? He walked quickly to the reception desk.

"My key, please." Would the clerk ask him the number?

"Yes, sir." The clerk looked faintly surprised. He took a key from its hook. Damn. It had been hanging just by his hand. Obviously he was in the habit of taking it himself.

He restrained the impulse to look at the number until he was mounting the stairs. Two-one-four. Second floor, then, but the figure struck no chord. At the landing he wondered whether habit would take him to right or left. No good. He had to look at the arrowed indicator on the wall.

The room would help, surely. He unlocked the door and took in the scene in one hungry, searching look. There must be something. After all, he lived here.

Not even the pattern of the counterpane was familiar.

No clothes were lying about but on the glass shelf over the wash basin he saw shaving kit and toilet articles. The drawer of the writing table came open with a jerk and was empty. That left only the wardrobe. He opened the long door.

What he saw was ordinary enough. A linen suit swung on a hanger, and on the little shelves at the side were several shirts, handkerchiefs, socks and underclothes. In the bottom of the ward-

robe was a new-looking suitcase of light leather, the key still in the lock. It took a minute of fumbling before he could lug the case on to the bed and click the key.

Inside lay a couple of crumpled, discarded shirts and underneath them was a smaller leather case. But what held his attention was a British passport.

He flattened it open at the page for identification. The photograph was his—he knew that without crossing to the mirror. The name was Robert Scrivener. He tried it over on his tongue silently and then aloud. *Robert Scrivener. Robert Scrivener.*

It meant nothing.

But a passport reveals more than that. The page headed "Description" said he was a journalist, born at Worcester on March 15th, 1919. His residence was London, his height was five feet ten inches, his eyes and hair were brown and he had no special peculiarities. The spaces for wife and children were blank. On the pages for visas was a smudgy stamp on which he could pick out "Paris" and something in Greek.

He tossed the passport on the bed and investigated the smaller case. The hasp of the lock swung loose as though it had been forced. Inside lay a number of cylinders wrapped in thick blue paper. He lifted one out gingerly and found it surprisingly heavy. The paper unwrapped easily and something rolled out, followed by a cascade. The cylinders were columns of coins, wrapped as he had seen them in a bank; the coins were English sovereigns.

For a moment he was quite still with astonishment. Then slowly he collected the coins which had rolled on to the counterpane, noting mechanically that there were twenty all told. He counted the cylinders and they came to twenty-five. Five hundred sovereigns.

He held his aching head in his hands. So he was a journalist, and his name was Robert Scrivener and he was in an Athens hotel with a large sum of money in gold. There must be other papers. Did anyone travel with absolutely no clue to his identity except a passport? He looked round the room wearily.

Under the writing table was an ornamental little basket. He

pushed it with his foot, and it rolled on its side, spilling out a piece of crumpled writing paper. Eagerly he smoothed it out. The writing was spiky and looked foreign :

Dear Mr. Scrivener,

It was a delight to learn of your presence and it will make me most content to attend you on Tuesday week. Until then, unhappily, I must go away on a visit which for long is arranged.

The signature was a sprawling flourish, of which he could read only "George" and the great initial "P."

He felt ill and afraid. Surely, surely this should suggest something and it did not. He needed help. This kind of thing happened to other people, and it was understood. He would go to the authorities and explain what he could.

Then his eyes fell on the money. No, he must not do that. No one travels on legitimate business with loose money on that scale and in that form. Therefore, whatever he was engaged in was not legitimate. He examined the thought for the first time, and it caused him no surprise. It merely confirmed the tiny warning signals that had flickered in his head ever since he woke up in the alley. Keep away from the police.

There was another feeling, too, and it had nothing to do with the law. He was being pursued. Out in the night were people who knew all about him and how he came to be here. They were responsible for this crack on the head and they wished him a greater ill than that. In his awful ignorance he felt as helpless as a child in a dark room.

His legs were weak, and the buzzing in his head made him feel giddy. With an effort he locked the money in the suitcase and the suitcase in the wardrobe. Mechanically his hand reached under the pillow and brought out folded pyjamas. I shall think it all over with care when I am in bed, he told himself.

The pillow was crisp and cool.

Next morning for a little while he lay passive, like a wounded man who dares not flex his limbs for fear of the injuries the move-

ment will reveal. Then cautiously he allowed his thoughts to travel back as far as they would.

The events since he came to life in the alley were etched sharply. But that moment was the barrier behind which he could not pass.

Sunshine was streaming on to the bed. When he sat up the walls seemed to teeter over and then he was all right; the lump on his skull was tender, but his headache and the singing noises had gone. He washed and shaved, eyeing himself in the mirror as though he might see a stranger. But the face was familiar and the razor ran over accustomed contours. At least he did not feel an alien inside his own body.

He descended the staircase. As he reached the lobby someone began to mount: a middle-aged man inclined to stoutness, his white suit setting off a dazzling tie. He said pleasantly in an American accent, "I can't stop now—should be at the office. But remind me to tell you about the trip I fixed."

"Yes, I will." Was that all right—the tone? Should he sound casual or eager? It didn't matter. The man was going up the stairs.

At a café opposite the hotel he asked for tea and the waiter brought a small china pot and a plate of sticky cakes. An English voice inquired, "May I join you?"

He forced himself to look round. The man had already pulled up a chair and was clapping his hands for the waiter. He was about thirty, with fair hair and a complexion made red by the sun.

"You had a late night, too?" he asked.

"Fairly late. Yes." That seemed safe enough.

"There's plenty to see."

"I'm sure there is."

"Anyway, I admire your principles, not getting down to work too early, I mean."

"I never do that if I can help it."

The man grunted and ordered coffee. He sat back and crossed his legs. "I was glad to see you got back last night without getting mixed up in the fuss. It seems they were after one of the big boys, but either he wasn't there or he got away. You'll hear about it at the morning conference."

"Conference?" As the word slipped out he felt a moment of panic. It was something he should know. The man's eyebrows went up, and then he laughed.

"I forgot you've only been here a couple of days. The press boys meet the military every Saturday morning. I can take you along, but I gather you aren't specially interested in spot news."

"Not specially." Only a couple of days. In that time he couldn't have met many people. "The fact is, my head is pretty bad, and I'd like to take things easy. For the moment, I mean."

He looked cautiously at the other man and was relieved to find what he said accepted without query. The other man said placidly, "I admire your stand. Most of our visitors want to tour the country in a morning, interview the Prime Minister the same afternoon, and start a book on Greece in the evening. But I warn you, tomorrow you'll find our Yankee friend exhausting. His trouble is that he knows about some things and talks about everything. Your problem is to sort out what he knows."

"You sound as though you don't like Americans."

"Old Pep's all right. Hell, I work for him. And that reminds me. Old Pep is expecting some contractors who no spikka da English, so I'd better be on my way." He got up lazily and flicked his fingers in a casual good-bye.

Robert Scrivener lit a cigarette. His main thought was the maddening lack of names. He didn't know whom he had been talking to, he didn't know where he was supposed to have been last night, and he didn't know why he was going on a trip with an American called Old Pep.

But he found satisfaction in one thing. His companion had no notion that since last night the black curtain had come down, turning the simplest references into riddles. The reason why he should conceal his plight was as obscure as ever, but the instinct to do so was still strong and unmistakable.

Another feeling went with it. If enemies were pursuing him—and he had no doubt of it—the man he had just been talking to was not one of them. Of that he was sure, but of little else.

And what the hell was the man's name?

CHAPTER 9

HE WANDERED through the hot streets, hardly aware of the noise and the crowds. His mind worried at the scraps he had learned, trying to turn them into a pattern, a shape he could recognize. But they were too few, and there was a consideration even more serious than his presence here in Athens. That was a blank, and bad enough; but behind it loomed a thought even more terrifying. The whole of his life was a blank.

It happened often enough. One read of such cases every week. A man found himself in a strange town, confessed his plight to the police, and frantic relatives rushed to the rescue. Disconcerting, for a time frightening, but essentially unremarkable.

Not at all the same thing as waking up in a far-off country, possessing money in gold sovereigns and knowing that one's life was in danger.

Towards one o'clock the heat became overpowering and the streets began to empty. He made his way back to the hotel and went straight up to his room. His eyes ached from the strong sunlight, and his temples were throbbing, and he lay limp on the bed, glad to be cool and quiet alone.

The soft buzz of the telephone woke him. A voice said in metallic English, "I am sorry to disturb you, but I did not tell you the number. It is 36, and the third floor. I shall expect you in half an hour. Number 36, Patissia Street."

It struck a chord—the name, not the voice. Scrivener opened his mouth to speak, but the phone clicked and was silent. Well, he would go to the address and learn what he could.

The building was a set of offices between department stores. No one was in the hall and when he pressed the button for the lift nothing happened. Scrivener mounted the stairs slowly.

A brass plate announced something in Greek and underneath gave the translation, Hellenic Enterprises, Inc. He pushed open the outer door, and a girl sitting at a typewriter looked up. As he

hesitated, she smiled and said in understandable English, "Mr. Scrivener? Please go in."

The inner office was covered by a thick carpet, and he was vaguely aware of a great many shiny telephones and fittings. But it was the man behind the desk who took all his attention. He was on his feet, supporting his weight on his knuckles. His tight mouth was bent in a smile, but there was no smile in his eyes. They were dark, deeply set, and without any expression at all.

He came round the desk briskly but with a slight limp and shook hands.

"I am glad to think you got away without harm. Please sit down. This time I don't think we shall be interrupted. Last night the fool of a waiter did not make himself clear at all, or we should have left earlier. That currency raid was most inconvenient."

Scrivener accepted a cigarette and sat in a low easy chair which sagged further and made him look up at the man. He was leaning back against the desk and surveying his visitor.

"You look pale, and I fear that indirectly it is my fault."

Scrivener chose his words with care. "Last night someone attacked me and I woke up in an alley. If I appear vague, you must put it down to that." He allowed himself a private little smile at the understatement. "When you speak of your fault, do you mean it was you who hit me on the head?"

The man was offended. He said frigidly, "I used the word 'indirectly.' After our talk, why should I wish to attack you? But Grigson did not know of our agreement, and I was unable to tell him. He found you on your way back to the *Britannic* and behaved impetuously. It was a stupid thing to do. No one but a fool would expect you to wander about the streets with the package in your pocket. But when he went through your clothes he was quite surprised not to find it. However, I apologize."

He paused, as though the matter was at an end, and it was for Scrivener to take up the conversation. This was the moment he had dreaded.

"As you say, our talk was interrupted"—whatever that might mean—"and it would be as well to go over the main points."

The Greek flicked his cigarette ash impatiently. "There is no need for discussion. You have the money, and you are a man who keeps your word. So please hand over the package, as we agreed."

"We agreed before the . . . interruption?"

"Not in formal words, perhaps." The man was looking at him oddly. "You protested against the transaction, I remember. That is business, of course, and no one is to blame for seeking a better price. The complete answer is that you have five hundred pounds in gold. Do you deny it?"

"I don't deny it." The man knew the exact sum and it would have been pointless to lie.

"And you have not brought back the money. Perhaps you have, then, brought your half of the bargain—the papers?"

Papers. He was supposed to have a package of papers.

"Not with me, no."

"Yet you come to my office as I ask." He seemed puzzled and was becoming a little angry. "If it is to ask for more money, you are making a mistake."

"The papers are valuable to you."

"You have been paid their full value. What is in them I don't know, but I do know it is my task to get them."

So the man wasn't the main enemy. From his tone Scrivener could tell he was supposed to know this.

"If you don't get them, you'll be in trouble."

He really was angry now, his eyes darting little lights. To regain control he limped round the desk and sat down. When he spoke, his voice was calm except for a faint tremor.

"You behave strangely, Mr. Scrivener. Last night your tone was courageous, self-righteous. It suited you, though to a Greek it is amusing. Although it was our first meeting I judged you to be a man of honour. Today you calmly propose to betray your word, to keep the money and withhold what it paid for."

"If you had to prove that you gave me the money . . ."

Again the odd look as though not sure whether to seek a hidden meaning. "Proof does not come into it. I should never be so mad as to admit holding such a sum in gold. For you it does not

matter. You are a foreigner and of no interest, so you need have no fear of accepting the money."

"So it comes to this, Mr.——" God. He had almost betrayed that he didn't know the man's name. Care, care all the time. He was choking on his cigarette and did it so well that his eyes watered. "I'm sorry. I was saying that it comes to this. I have the money, but you wouldn't care to complain of that to the police."

His eyes were sharp daggers. "You have not been to the police."

"And you want this package. Can you show me why you should have it?"

"It is paid for, and that is enough."

"I could restore the money to you."

"The package, Mr. Scrivener. Nothing else will do." Despite the revealing eyes his voice was even now. "As your uncle's heir you may think you have a prior claim to it. But you must consider how *he* got it."

So he had an uncle, who was dead. "Don't you think he was honest?"

"From what I hear of him, completely. An eminent man of whom you are no doubt proud. The point of ownership is academic. What really matters is that unless you hand over the package my instructions are to kill you."

At the serene voice Scrivener's stomach went cold. He must rouse the man, excite him, deprive him of this awful advantage.

"You haven't been very successful so far, have you?"

It was a desperate challenge and it didn't work. The man smiled. "You forget, I haven't tried. What happened in England has nothing to do with what can happen in Greece. Until this afternoon I assumed you were a sensible young man prepared to buy and sell. Now I see that your earlier escapes have twisted your judgment. It is a pity."

My earlier escapes, he reflected wryly, were made when I knew who I was and what I was doing. And they were made in England, where I would know my way about. But it is encouraging to know there *have* been earlier escapes, because quite clearly I am up

against something formidable. The amount of money tells me so, the fact that this man is only an agent tells me so.

Yes, formidable. And so far I have got out of it—whatever “it” is. That’s something, even if now I have to feel round like a blind man. It is this blindness that makes me afraid; that makes the task of killing me, if they only realized it, as simple as pushing a man under a train.

Pushing a man under a train. It was like a bell in his head. He could see the train, hear its roar, it was real and terrifying. It had significance, enormous meaning, but remotely.

He shook his head. The Greek gave a thin smile.

“It is unfair of me to press you when you are not well. Grigson might have done you serious injury. However, I must report to London tonight, and if it is not a satisfactory report there will be other people on their way to Athens. Perhaps even my employer.”

That was clearly meant to convey a new threat, but Scrivener did not care. The black fear of a world crowded with unknown enemies was taking firmer shape.

He was lost and in the dark and pressed by great danger, and all these things made him afraid. But fearful and uncertain though he was, he was not a coward. He got to his feet. “Give my love to your employer. I hope he won’t be too cross with you. You don’t want the money back, and I’m afraid you can’t have the package. It’s a bit of a mess, isn’t it?”

He backed to the door, but the Greek made no effort to stop him. His cheeks showed high spots of colour as he stood motionless behind the desk.

“I should not like to think you are speaking seriously.”

“I am. Good day.”

And so I am, he told himself, as he walked down the stairs into the sunny street. I have no choice.

Once again he ran over in his mind the hotel room, its furnishings and his few possessions. When he got back he would search minutely. But it would be out of a sense of duty and without hope or expectation. The hotel room was the only world he knew, and its pale blue walls were his conscious horizon. He

could not tell where the certainty came from, but before he got back he could say with complete confidence that the place contained no package.

CHAPTER 10

UP THERE on the Acropolis, in the brittle light and shimmering heat, the man who was called Robert Scrivener paused in his story. It had come out in faltering phrases, in little rushes of explanation and, encouraged by her grave silence, his voice became stronger and more fluent. But not everything that was in his mind came out in words, and her imagination had to bridge the gaps of those months since it had happened to him.

He was gazing in silence across the roofs of the city to the hazy distance and the sea beyond.

Jane said, "Was that the only time you met Kronopoulos?"

His head came round sharply. She went on, "I saw him yesterday. He thought I was a confederate of yours."

"I didn't know his name." He tried it over on his tongue. "It means nothing. Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"And the man who employs him?"

"He didn't say."

Scrivener got up, paced restlessly to the edge of the platform and peered over the drop. But his mind was elsewhere. When he came back and sat beside the girl in the shade of a pillar he was seeing again that frightening world of unknowns in which he was caught up.

THE SEARCH of his hotel room was as fruitless as he expected. There were no papers. Sitting on the bed he groped after what he should do next. Get back to England? But the whole adventure had begun there, and he would find no safety in returning. Try and convince the Greek? His mouth twisted in a grim smile at the thought. Fight back, then? You can't fight back at something that may attack any hour, any day, and in any place.

One by one he rejected the possibilities and in the end reduced them to a single idea. It was not brilliant; but there was no other. The essential thing was money, not these unwieldy pieces of gold but money that could be used without question.

There was an essential before that. He must have someone who would help him without asking questions. And in all Greece he was aware of only three people whom he knew even to speak to. There was the Greek, his enemy; the American, old Pep; and the Englishman who worked for Pep.

Would the Englishman do? Scrivener sorted out his impressions. The man knew Greece and spoke the language. From his tone of conversation he probably was not easily surprised or shocked. Robert decided on a wary approach. This was little enough to have worked out, but it was positive. He felt more cheerful, but he could not yet risk encounters with people he was supposed to know. He took refuge in the café where he had had breakfast. The tables were filling up with the predinner crowd and he felt adequately camouflaged. For a long time he sat over an *apéritif*, pondering.

A voice said, "It must be your journalist's nose for news. You've smelled out Yannaki's lobster." The man sat down uninvited and Scrivener found himself looking without surprise at the pink face of his companion of the morning.

"I haven't eaten yet, but let me offer you a drink."

"Thanks." The man was looking at him thoughtfully, but in the blue eyes was a glimmer of amusement. "Suppose you come clean, Mr. . . . ah . . . Scrivener."

"Clean?" It was not a question but a gulp.

"Suppose you admit you haven't the faintest idea what my name is."

His stomach turned over. The man knew. But how *could* he know? Scrivener fought to keep his voice steady.

"That's an odd thing to say. But of course you're right. I'm afraid your name escapes me. My memory plays silly tricks, and this is one of them."

The man's amusement was no longer concealed.

"It's happened to me too. You talk in a matey way to somebody and at the end of it you ask yourself: who the hell *is* that character? Sometimes it comes and sometimes it doesn't. In your case it obviously doesn't, so I thought a showdown was best."

So that was all. Scrivener struggled to conceal his relief.

"The best thing," he agreed, "even if embarrassing. I'm glad you decided on it." He paused. "You haven't told me yet."

"Saxton. Paul Saxton."

"How-do-you-do, Mr. Saxton." His mind was scrabbling busily but the name touched no chord. Never mind: this was the first stroke of luck that had come his way. It was something to go on.

"I'd like to ask you to dinner, Mr. Saxton, but at the moment the funds don't run to it."

"Nice of you. They cash traveller's cheques at the hotel, you know."

"That wouldn't help me. I haven't any."

"I say, that's bad." The concern sounded sincere. "This is no country to be broke in. They don't let you work off a hotel bill washing dishes. You could go to the Embassy. If you can prove you have assets back home they'll probably make you an advance."

"I don't mean I'm broke. I just haven't found the right medium of exchange."

Saxton considered the words carefully and shook his head. "I'm sorry, but it's not worth it. Dollars or Swiss francs, yes. The odd pound note for small change, too, perhaps. But sizeable quantities of pound notes . . . You'd destroy your own market."

"I haven't any pound notes, either."

The man stared. "Then what the devil are you talking about?"

For answer Scrivener laid his hand flat on the table. "That," he said simply, and took it away. The gleam of the small coin was dull in the lamplight. Saxton gave a low hiss of surprise and covered the coin with his own hand.

"That's different, of course. No trouble at all if you know the ropes."

"You can get Greek money for it? Legally?"

"Will one do?"

"Two more—for now."

Saxton got up and spoke to the waiter in Greek. He explained briskly, "I've told him to let you have what you want and to keep the bill for me. I'll charge you for it. If you meet me here in the morning I'll let you know how business is."

"Just a minute." Scrivener's tone was sharp with suspicion. "How do I know I'll see you in the morning?"

"That's right, you don't know." Saxton smiled. "You don't know either what exchange rate I can get. What do you want—an I.O.U. for three gold sovereigns? The proposition was yours, not mine. I can do without it." He paused. "Can you?"

Scrivener wriggled inwardly and damned his suspicions. Honest or not, the man was the only possible broker and somehow he was aware of it. He was still standing there and smiling, the coins concealed in his hand but held loosely.

"I didn't mean that. Until the morning, then." A thought occurred to him. "That won't do. I have an appointment with your friend Old Pep."

"When will you be back?"

"I don't know." He didn't. "Let's meet at this time, here."

"As you say. Meanwhile, this will help you." Saxton put a bundle of notes on the table. "I'll charge for that, too." He edged away between the crowded tables.

One obstacle overcome. It was clear that to change gold was illegal. But Saxton was willing to undertake it.

The morning would bring another hurdle. He ate well and went to bed with a feeling of guarded optimism.

OLD PEP was dressed in khaki drill and a flowered tie, denoting that while he was not a member of the American forces his connection with them was official. Scrivener hoped his linen suit was not too hopelessly civilian.

"Had breakfast?" The American beamed through his rimless spectacles. "I told Steve nine o'clock with the jeep, so I guess he'll show up around ten." He pushed through the swing doors and

exclaimed in surprise, "What do you know!" There at the kerb was the car, and at the wheel grinned a swarthy Greek.

With remarkable agility considering his bulk the American climbed into the back of the jeep. With a frightening jerk Steve let in the clutch, and they were on their way. Old Pep sighed. "No respect for machinery. It's the same at the dam."

Scrivener ventured to ask, "Is it a long way?" He held his breath. Perhaps he should know.

"Twenty-five miles north." It was all right. They were running out of the city, and the jeep bounced and reared as though alive. "Now, Mr. Scrivener, it's up to you. Tell me what you'd like to know, and I'll do my best for you."

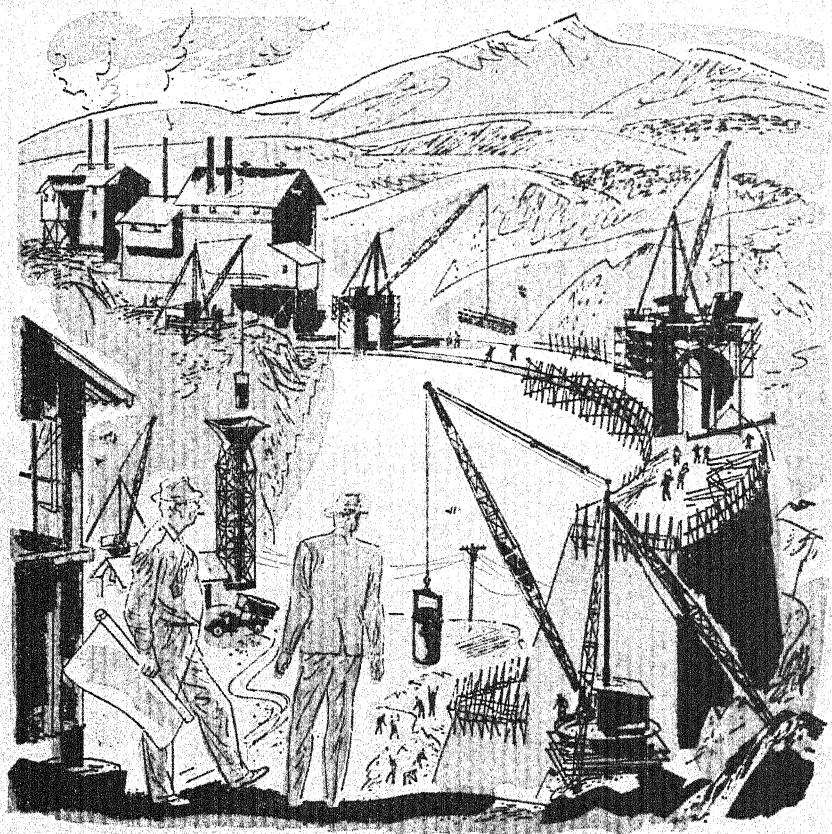
Robert was doing his best not to be hurled over the shallow side of the jeep, but managed to recall his rôle as journalist. Between rattling teeth he said, "I'd like some facts and figures about the dam."

Old Pep's eyes gleamed professionally and he responded with a stream of statistics. Robert caught snatches about man-hours and kilowatts but was quite unable to piece them together. He was thankful that in this situation he could not possibly be expected to take notes.

They struck across open country and at last came to a little community of wooden huts. From beyond came a roar of machinery which sounded above the noise of the car, the clank of engines and the periodic thud of a pile driver. Old Pep climbed out. They were in a shallow bowl of ground which trapped and threw back the heat and amplified the clangour.

Beyond the wooden huts and concealed by them was a sudden drop, and Robert looked down on an ant-like world of cranes, scaffolding, wheels and scurrying forms. But all of it was made insignificant by the thing which dominated the scene, the reason for the whole activity. Tall, curving, smooth and white rose the dam, dazzling in the morning light. He stood gazing for a moment in silence and then hurried to catch the American.

"Impressive, huh? Aside from my six engineers the whole work was done by local labour. Another few months and it will



be ready. Come the rains, and—— Hi, Omar.”

“Morning, Mr. Peppercorn.”

Another minor mystery solved. Peppercorn.

“This is Mr. Robert Scrivener, a journalist. My foreman, Omar Proctor.”

“Glad to know you, Mr. Scrivener.”

“How-do-you-do, Mr. Proctor.” They shook hands.

Peppercorn spread out a rolled map and explained it. When the rains came, the narrow valley along which the jeep had bumped would become a rushing torrent. The earth on either side

would soak up some of the water, but the great bulk of it would wash away, and with the coming of the spring the countryside would shrivel once more. That was the story of Greece and its tragedy, the tragedy of eight million people trying to scratch a living from rock and crumbling clay. That was why the Greeks of four thousand years ago fought their neighbours and each other, to gain possession of the patches of arable land, which were too few and too poor to sustain them.

To harness the water, to conserve it and use it—that was the problem. Before the war American money, skill and labour had shown the way, and the great dam at Marathon bound in the waters that flowed to Athens in the heat of summer. Here, on a smaller scale, was the lesson repeated, the shaping of a lake to feed the arid earth throughout the year, to make it green and fresh and fruitful.

Peppercorn stubbed his finger from point to point on the map while Robert crouched beside him. Here, he reflected, was something clear-cut, a problem of logistics and ponderables, exactly suited to this American spirit. And behind it was a simple purpose, simple but infinitely worth while.

They returned to the jeep and found the driver stretched under it, his feet protruding. He was awakened with difficulty and drove them to a scanty olive grove that gave some shelter from the sun. Peppercorn unpacked a wicker lunch basket, spreading out a large and splendid collation of cold food. "Tell me," he said between mouthfuls, "who do you write for?" He clucked in annoyance and corrected himself. "Of course. You told me you're a free-lance. But this piece about the dam, who's that for?"

Robert was grateful for the lead. "That depends. Some editors like a thing done one way, others another." He paused, and Peppercorn gave a sage nod. "I'll have to see how it works out. But I'll send you a copy."

"Mighty nice of you. Anything else you want to know . . ." He stretched out on his back, hands over his stomach and slept.

Robert lay flat and smoked, but the peace of the blue sky and brown earth was spurious. Here at the dam, away from Athens,

he could pretend to have escaped his problems. But he hadn't. More than ever the plan he had decided on was necessary and urgent. If it gave him nothing else it would give him time.

And in some way he could not guess at, he felt that the dam itself and the valley were part of the answer he must find.

CHAPTER 11

SAXTON SAID, "We'll take a walk. It's better not to do this kind of business in cafés."

They crossed the square and went into the Zappion gardens. The sun slanted through the pale fluffy pepper trees and gleamed on the dark smoothness of the laurels. On the park benches mothers sat, perambulators beside them. The two men found an empty bench shadowed by a fountain.

Saxton handed over a thick bundle of notes. "The market's uneasy, but you haven't been robbed."

"And your ten per cent?"

"I deducted that."

"I suppose you don't see much gold nowadays."

"Practically none. Did you enjoy your trip with Pep?"

"I learned a lot. The dam is his pride and joy. He has reason to be proud."

"I hope you told him so."

"You like working for him?"

Saxton shrugged. "It's a living. Better than the Press Department at the Embassy. That was a job, like any other. I learned a few things, though." He sat back and stretched his legs. "I learned how to tell a journalist."

It was coming. Robert looked straight ahead and tried to be as casual. "And how do you do that?"

"He has a way of talking and a way of looking at things. He knows other press men, and they know him. Do you remember I asked you about two or three correspondents the other night?"

The other night? When they first met. Before the bang on the head.

"You knew of them, you said. But one of them doesn't exist. I made him up."

"Why?"

"Because you hadn't the right way I just referred to. Does Pep know?"

"No. What are you going to do about it?"

"Why, nothing." There was a look of surprise on his round face. "It isn't a crime to say you're a journalist."

"It might be connected with a crime."

"So it might." Saxton fumbled for his cigarettes. "You mean, about the sovereigns. Funny, I haven't heard of any loss in that line lately."

"Would you hear?"

"Probably. I still have a few pals in the military."

"So you wonder who I am."

"It's none of my business. Maybe you robbed a bank somewhere and got the hell out of it to Greece. As I said, I haven't heard so, but maybe that was it. Or maybe a hundred other things. You ask me to change a few coins, and I get my commission. I leave it there. If I can help you again, let me know."

"I think you can. Do you want a job?"

"Depends on whether I like the work."

Robert paused to marshal his story. It was true, as Saxton guessed, that he was not a journalist. He was a private traveller and in poor health. (That was certainly accurate.) He was seeking somewhere to build up his strength, to live quietly and regain . . . Hurriedly he altered "memory" to "physique." He had money but not the experience to use it as he wished.

Saxton listened without comment, and if he noticed the gaps in the sketchy little narrative he gave no sign. He said, "Housing is simple. All that matters is the cash. And then?"

Robert plunged. "And then I should like you to take it over and run it for me, until . . . until I'm well again."

He waited expectantly. It all must stand or fall by this.

"That's something else." Saxton was gazing thoughtfully into the distance. "I've got no contract with Pep and I could get him

to release me tomorrow. But this arrangement might work badly. We hardly know each other." He ruminated. "I'll go as far as this. If I can find the place you want I'll put it in order and look after it for a while. When you've settled down you'll be able to hire some local help."

It was dusk when they walked back to the hotel, and Robert was glad to be clear of the shadowy gardens. Two points he had not mentioned—the need for speed and the need for secrecy. But somehow he was confident that Saxton appreciated both. He was leaning on the man, leaning on him too much, but there was no one else and the relief was exquisite.

"AND so you went to the island," said Jane, as Scrivener paused in his story. "Didn't Kronopoulos know?"

"Not till last week. That was the first attack."

"And you haven't told Saxton any more than he knew at first?"

"Nothing more. He found the house on the island and fitted it up. So far he's stuck it out. We get on quite well and he doesn't ask questions."

"It might have helped you if you'd talked to him."

"No. I don't know why, but it wouldn't." He looked at her with his brow furrowed and his eyes troubled. "So far nothing has helped. Sometimes there are little pictures in my mind but they vanish. I've tried exercises—making my mind a blank, an empty screen. Have you ever tried to do that?"

"These pictures . . ."

He concentrated. "There's the apple tree, of course. There's a public house—in London, I think, and an odd-looking man. He's my friend. There's a man with grey hair, sitting in an easy chair opposite me and talking earnestly. He's saying something very important. And there are car headlights shining on a wet road. That one frightens me."

"What about yourself?"

"Some things I know now. My clothes are good and I think I'm used to good things. I can tell I'm used to service from the

way I take it for granted. I don't think I'm a coward, but it's hard to separate fear of danger from fear of the unknown." He gave a rueful laugh. "As you see, I'm conceited, too."

She in her turn was thinking hard, chin in hand, as she gazed into the blue distance. "Did you stay on the island?"

"I've been back to Athens several times. And each time I come up here."

"So do lots of people. It's just about the most famous plot of land in the world."

"I suppose so." He looked round vaguely. "But that's not the reason. If I knew what it was I should have the whole answer."

"You never got in touch with the man who left you the note—George P. something?"

"He might be one of them."

"So might anybody. If you think on those lines you'll never stop being scared. And if you run away all the time and hide, you'll never remember."

The tone made him look up in surprise. She went on, "I believe it's helped just a little bit to talk to me. Bottling it up makes it worse. Suppose you *are* a criminal. That's what you're afraid of finding out, isn't it? If you want my opinion, I don't think you are. But someday you've got to know, and the first thing is to tell the only man who can help you."

"Paul?"

"From what you say he isn't too fussy about what's the law and what isn't. He's helped you up to now. He's helped me, too, but that's by the way. If you're frank with him he can do more. I'm certain of it."

He pondered. "I don't see how. But if it would be fairer to him I will." He looked at her anxiously. "Do you think he'll believe me?"

"I think he will." She got up. They began to pick their way down the hill, scuffling the stones at their feet. As they approached the Propylaea, the great gateway to the hill, five figures were mounting the marble steps abreast. The centre one, chatting animatedly, was Paul Saxton. The others walked in silence.

Saxton gave a friendly wave. "I thought you'd be here. Nice to see you, Miss Arden. I was calling on Mr. Kronopoulos, and he was kind enough to introduce me to his friends. You know, of course, Robert."

Kronopoulos. His friends. Two of them were the men Jane had seen the night before—the burly Englishman and the dark foreigner. The remaining man she had never seen before. He said pleasantly, "It is some time since we saw each other, Mr. Scrivener. I haven't had the pleasure of meeting the lady."

Jane thought desperately: why *didn't* he tell Saxton? This time it is bound to come out. This time no evasion will do and they will find he is as helpless as a blind man.

Robert's face was white and his mouth was twitching. Sweat stood on his forehead and his fingers opened and closed. The words came with difficulty as though he were struggling for breath.

"This is Miss Jane Arden." He was trembling like a man in a fever, fighting a roaring turmoil inside his head. It was the voice, the voice, rasping the English words. Not sight but sound was the key, this sound, this man.

The spasm passed, leaving him as weak as one who comes out of delirium. His eyes opened wide. "Mr. Kronopoulos you know." He spoke clearly now and there was wonder and understanding in his tone. "This is Mr. Winster, whom I knew in London. And this is Mr. Teplitz, who is fond of motoring. And this gentleman," he turned to the unknown man, "is the employer of Mr. Kronopoulos and formerly a colleague of my uncle. This is Baron von Hersfeld."

Fear Is the Beginning

CHAPTER 12

THE CURTAINS swung back with a swish Robert could almost hear, back to the birthday party in the flat high over Hampstead Heath. That cool evening in March was the beginning of everything.

His lost personality draped itself on him like a suit of clothes. He felt no sense of wonder at its return; merely irritation that anything so familiar should have evaded him so long.

Once again he was Robert Garry, bachelor, and on that evening when it began he was celebrating the fact that he had reached the age of thirty.

The party had not been altogether successful. His friends were a mixed lot. Those from the advertising agency, where he worked as a copywriter, tended to group together and smile uneasily. The rowdier ones, identified as artistic by their bizarre clothing, made the most of the drinks and went out of their way to shock the conventional element. As the evening progressed, one of the latter group had made a facetious reference to Robert's war service. The joke had put a damper on his spirits. Of course he wasn't touchy about it! He couldn't help his heart, could he? Those bloody army doctors had looked so grave. In vain he protested that he had played football, swum, even rowed in his college eight.

The fact that he was well off made it worse. It was wonderful what money could do. No doubt he had slipped a fiver to the chairman of the medical board?

He had felt he must do something: Disconsolately he had tramped from office to office, and to his surprise eventually found himself behind a desk at the Ministry of Food. Here it was his duty through expensive advertisements to persuade a sullen public that

a pound of sausage meat, properly cooked, was as sustaining as a side of beef, and healthier.

Robert had found his war effort hateful, and he did not want to be reminded of it. What made it worse was that there had been no one he could confide in, no wife or even sister who could understand his misery. No one, that is, except Uncle John, who spoke very little but who could be relied on to understand in silence.

By the way, where *was* Uncle John? It was after ten, and he was disappointed that the old boy had not turned up. They had not met for at least three months and Robert was looking forward to it. No doubt he was lecturing at Aberdeen or Cardiff or somewhere. But it was unlike him not to send a message.

In another hour, the last of the guests had finally gone, moved mainly by the thought that nothing in the world is quite so dreary as a party after the drink has run out. Robert looked around the scattered room and wondered whether to make a start on clearing up. He was lifting a couple of smeared glasses without enthusiasm when the bell rang. Some fool had forgotten something, and at this time of night there was no porter to let him in again. Robert leaned out of the window and peered down to the illuminated front steps. From that height the figure was too squat to identify but he recognized the car. Uncle John at last.

When he had let him in, he said, "The party is over, but I don't suppose you mind. Do sit down, if you can find a chair that isn't slopped." He brought out some brandy that had been too good to serve at the party. "You like this, I know."

John Darlow sipped with appreciation. He was short and wiry, with smooth grey hair and brown eyes that twinkled from a brown face. These, with the jut of the upper lip, reminded Robert of an exceptionally intelligent monkey.

Darlow leaned back, stretched his legs and studied his glass against the light. "Next to having money," he said amiably, "the best thing is observing that those who do have it spend it wisely."

He drank carefully and put his glass down. He had an air that made Robert look at him more closely, an air of trying to bottle up something that was going to fizz over. Robert

finally spoke. "You've something on your mind. Important?"

"The most important thing I ever came across."

Robert was startled. John Darlow was given more to careful understatement than to flat pronouncements. Unlike the scientist, who deals with measurable knowledge that is subject to proof, his world was one of imponderable values, of judgments based on nebulous certainty. His tools were his eyes, which for thirty years had been learning to distinguish the good from the bad, the real from the worthless; and behind the eyes was a mind which told him why such distinction was so. John Darlow was an authority on art, and on the art of the ancient world he was held by many to be the greatest authority of them all.

Darlow got up. "I'll prowl, if I may." He clasped his hands and picked his way absently through the crowded furniture and empty glasses. Robert remembered the classroom manner.

"The most famous piece of sculpture in the world is the Venus de Milo, or more properly, the Aphrodite of Melos. Any child can recognize it at a glance. Plaster casts of it stand on a million sideboards in every part of the world.

"The Venus was carved not long before the Christian era, and several centuries after Greek art was in full flower. However, that is not so important. What is remarkable is this—the statue that is known and loved above all others was lost for two thousand years. Its very existence was not even suspected until just over a century ago, until 1820. You may think it has been admired and copied almost since civilization began; but in fact this familiar piece of drawing-room bric-à-brac was never known to anyone who died about the same time as Napoleon.

"It was discovered by a peasant on the Greek island of Melos—or, in Italian, Milo—hence the name. At that time Greece was ruled by the Turks, who had little respect for Hellenic culture of any kind. Their ultimate abomination, you may remember, was to use the Parthenon as an arsenal." Darlow winced. "With such an outlook they had little time for a broken statue dug out of a niche in a ruined town. But the French Ambassador to Turkey was a man of more discrimination. He bought the work, broken as it

was, and promptly shipped it to France as a gift to his king, Louis XVIII. The king in turn presented it to the Louvre, where it may be seen today and will probably remain forever.

"Its merits were quickly recognized even if they could not be defined. From the plaster images you have seen you can get some notion of its beauty, of the artist's vision of proud majestic womanhood. But unless you visit the Louvre you can have no idea of the full genius of the work." Darlow was now walking up and down faster, his hands clasping and unclasping behind him. "The life-like quality, the freshness of the flesh, the softness of the skin, the reality of the folds of the neck—you would not believe that marble could live like this unless you saw it."

He resumed his more precise manner. "It is not my purpose to dwell on this aspect of the matter. For a moment I must be a little technical. Most people, and no doubt you are among them, imagine that Greek statuary was carved out of one solid block of marble. That was in fact the later Roman way, but the Greeks were more economical. Nearly all their statues are pieced together, and the Venus is no exception. It is composed of two blocks of marble, the head and naked torso being one, the draped legs and the base of the statue the other. The line of jointure is just above the garment which is falling from the hips.

"The stance of the work is not easily explained. She is proud and erect but leaning to the right. Nevertheless she faces slightly to the left. Her left foot, which is lost, was on some raised object, perhaps a tortoise or a helmet.

"What is the meaning of this attitude? It is a riddle that has caused more speculation than the smile of Mona Lisa. There has been no conclusive answer—for one reason, the missing arms."

Darlow paused, and Robert knew they were coming to the heart of the matter.

"The whole of the left arm from the shoulder is missing. It was not broken off but was a separate work, and you can see the hole in which it was pieced to the body. The right arm is broken off, just above the elbow. Their absence obscures the rhythm and meaning of the noblest carving in the world.

"What were they doing, these arms? They were never discovered. It is true that in 1822, two years after the statue was unearthed, archaeologists found near the same place part of a left arm and hand holding an apple. But these are beyond doubt either clumsy forgeries or fragments of other works.

"Perhaps she *was* holding the apple of discord. Perhaps she was contemplating her reflection in a shield. Perhaps again her left arm held up a buckler on which were engraved the names of fallen heroes. Or it may be that the work was part of a group, in which Venus is raising her arms to appease the anger of Ares with caresses.

"There are points for all these theories. They have all been maintained with heat, for we art experts are the most quarrelsome fellows in the world. But no argument has proved more conclusive than any other."

He fell silent for so long that Robert began to fear the thread was lost. Then he turned with a sigh and patted his pocket vaguely. Robert got to his feet and handed across a box of cigarettes.

"And which theory do *you* favour?" he said. "Or have you found a new one?"

Darlow lit his cigarette. "I haven't found a new theory. But I think I have found the arms. I mean the arms of Venus."

CHAPTER 13

AMID THE mess of the party where only an hour ago there had been noisy laughter, the apologetic tone was out of place. A statement like this, Robert felt vaguely, should be made solemnly to a gathering that would receive it with dignity. His own tumbling thoughts were quite the wrong reaction. As the bits whirled in his head he strove to fit them into a pattern.

"You have the missing pieces here in England?"

"Not quite that." The crinkled smile broke through. "But if you know where something is, you can regard it as found."

"And where is it?"

"Where you would expect. In Greece."

"You haven't been to Greece since the war."

"Spielter has, not since the war but during the war. Spielter was a pupil of mine, a German. During the occupation he worked in Greece with a colleague, and they made some notable discoveries.

"The Venus discovery was made where you would expect—on the island of Melos. It came rather late in the war, and there was barely time to get the pieces to the mainland before the British landed and drove the Germans north. Spielter managed to get to Cologne and has lived in retirement. He was never a Nazi, so he had nothing to fear politically. A letter from him reached me at the cottage today. Poor Spielter is dead, and the letter is a kind of will. It told me the story of his discoveries."

"If Spielter found the arms of Venus, where are they now?"

"Buried on the Greek mainland. From the directions I could reach the place and point to the spot within a yard."

"They must be worth—well, how much?"

"Commercially, nothing. There could be only one customer."

"The French Government."

"And if they declined, a public subscription for completing the Venus de Milo would raise a million in a week."

"So you're in the money. Good for you." He saw his uncle flush and was sorry for his clumsy facetiousness. "Who else knows?"

"Spielter's colleague. It may have been he who phoned me this morning and told me to burn the papers."

Robert sat up abruptly. "*Burn* them?"

"If the call was from him it makes sense. In the first place, he is the only other one now who knows the papers exist."

"Spielter could have told anybody."

"He didn't. And secondly, his colleague knows already where the arms are buried. He helped to do it."

"And he wants the kudos for himself. When he phoned, what did you do?"

"Rang off and did some thinking. Then I came to see you."

Robert leaped to his feet. "You haven't brought the papers with you!"

"Don't upset yourself. I haven't. They are still at the cottage."

"Your telephone friend will have wrecked the place by now."

"He doesn't know they are there. And he won't find them."

"What comes next?"

"That was the main part of the thinking I did." He gazed into the fireplace. "I should consult the people at the University of Athens. We know each other, which makes it easier. If they share my views we can organize a dig. And what a dig it will be!"

Robert agreed. He could see the headlines, the photographs. The news would be on every front page in the world. But John Darlow was not thinking of that. Whether the instrument was he or another, the fact was what mattered: the chance to enrich the experience of all who were moved by beauty.

Robert turned to the question that had nagged at the back of his mind. He still shied away from putting it directly.

"Have you told anyone else?"

"There's been no chance yet, but I shan't."

"Then," and this was the crux of the matter, "why do you tell me?" He went on hastily now that it was out. "Don't misunderstand me. I do appreciate the importance."

"You can help." Darlow was a little uneasy. "If you will."

"I don't know anything at all about art. I can't think of any way except . . . oh, money." He stopped and then grinned. "Go to bed. In the morning you can work out how much you'll need."

"I'm afraid I ought to fly out," Darlow said. "It costs a good deal." The thought damped his exuberance and left him faintly distressed.

"Call it a loan. Don't you know you're going to make a lot of money, whether you like it or not?" Robert strolled over to the window. "The car will be all right in the mews. You aren't the only late bird. There's another car twenty yards down the road."

"A Buick?"

"It might be. There's no one in it. Yes, I think it is." He swung round from the window.

Darlow got up. "I was followed from the cottage by a Buick."

PERHAPS because of the brandy Robert slept well, and at breakfast Darlow said he also had had a good night. But he had little else to say. A glance out of the window told Robert the strange car had gone and now, in the watery sunlight of a spring morning, he wondered whether imagination had played any part in that aspect of his uncle's story.

Robert spent the morning turning out some particularly odious copy and was glad when lunchtime came. Darlow was waiting at the bar in the pub where Robert lunched. As he ordered beer for both of them he looked more cheerful. The passport office had promised to complete formalities within three days; and the Bank of England had been unexpectedly sympathetic over currency allowance.

They crossed from the bar to one of the little tables. The place was filling up.

"Marseilles, Rome, Athens," Darlow was saying. His dark eyes twinkled with pleasure at the thought. "I ought to stay in Paris on the way and have a quick look in the Louvre, but that can wait. If everything turns out well I dare say I shall be commissioned to do the restoration myself. That would be . . ." His voice trailed away and he put down his soup spoon with care. Robert saw his attention had shifted suddenly. It appeared to focus on the crowded stretch of the bar just inside the door. The laughter had gone out of his face.

"You lunch here often, I believe," he said. "In a moment or two, look round over your left shoulder at the man in the grey suit. His shirt is white and his tie has broad red stripes."

Robert let his napkin fall to the floor, and as he picked it up, he got a look at the bar.

"Strangely I do know him. I met him for the first time at the flat last night. His name is Winster—a friend of a friend."

"Could he have driven the car?"

"Car? The Buick? No, he couldn't. Why should he?"

"Because if he wasn't following me last night, he was today. I saw him at the bank, at the passport office and now here."

Robert tried to recall what he had heard about the man. A

writer, wasn't he? A journalist of a kind—he wrote free-lance stuff on finance, someone had said.

But why should he follow Uncle John?

Obviously, for some reason connected with the Venus. Therefore he must be connected with the unknown telephone voice who had called Uncle John. Perhaps he was the voice.

"Why should he follow you?"

"To find out whether I have Spielter's papers with me, and if so, what I am doing with them. I've been nowhere this morning where I could leave them, so he may be convinced that I haven't brought them. Though I *could* have left them in your flat."

"They are at the cottage; you said so."

"Our unknown friend doesn't know that. From his point of view it is highly likely that I did bring them to you."

"He'll search a long time before he——" Robert went pale. "Excuse me." He dashed to the phone and dialled the porter's flat at Hampstead Heath. The porter had been trying to get him for half an hour. His flat was upside down, and the police would like him to come home at once.

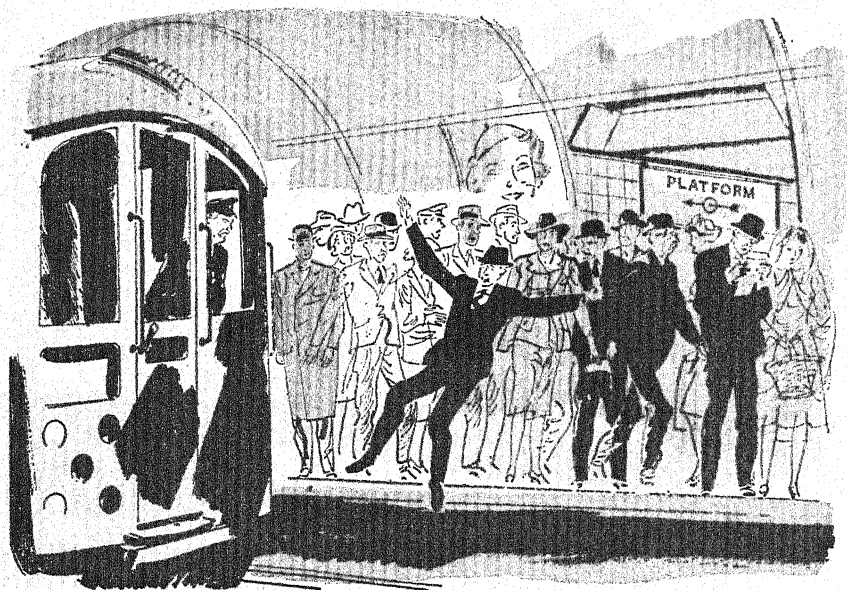
CHAPTER 14

THE alarm clock rang by his bedside, and still half asleep, he dragged his dressing gown from the bottom of the bed and padded to the door to collect the milk and the papers.

He went back through the living-room to the kitchen, remembering the mess of yesterday. The place had been a shambles. And for nothing. Not a thing had gone, which was stupid. An intelligent burglar would have taken something, if only to give an air of normality to the crime.

As he turned on the gas under the kettle Robert glanced at the paper. He noted with mild interest that the United Nations were quarrelling again, that a Cabinet Minister was predicting prosperity in 1965, and that an art expert was dead.

Mr. John Darlow, leading authority on the art of pre-Christian



times, was killed instantly last night when he fell under a tube train at Leicester Square station.

The accident occurred at the evening rush hour when the platform was crowded, and it is thought that Mr. Darlow may have been jostled and lost his footing. An obituary notice will be found on page 3.

Robert stood still. He could see the garish lights of the station. The noise of the train was in his ears, and the rush of wind swept his face. On the platform the crowd edged a little closer forward, guessing where the coach doors would come to rest and slide back. And then a slight ripple of disturbance, an arm waving wildly in a desperate attempt at balance. The train was slowing down, but must still go on. . . .

As NEXT of kin, he was required to attend the inquest. It was

held that afternoon in a room above the mortuary. A subdued jury of seven listened while the coroner outlined their duties. Cromer, the dead man's solicitor, was also present.

Robert was the first witness. He testified that the dead man was in good health and spirits on the day of his death. He was not subject to giddiness and he had no outstanding worries.

Robert stood down. The usher called, "Anton Teplitz."

Mr. Teplitz acknowledged in a voice that held only a trace of accent that he was thirty-eight years old and a citizen of Czechoslovakia. A few moments before six o'clock on the previous evening he was waiting on the platform at Leicester Square station for a train to Baker Street. He heard a train approaching and there was a movement behind him as people coming down the steps to the platform quickened their pace. The crowd was forced forward, he among them. When the train was almost abreast of him a man in front seemed to lose his balance and tumbled on to the line. The driver had no chance at all to avoid the accident. At that time Mr. Teplitz did not know the identity of the dead man.

Didn't you, you swine, thought Robert.

Mr. Teplitz was dismissed.

He was followed by a worried-looking man, the driver, who insisted with vehemence that he had no chance to stop. Robert expected Mr. Cromer to cross-examine, but he remained seated.

No further evidence was called and the coroner released the jury for deliberation. Within three minutes a verdict was returned of accidental death, with a footnote that the driver of the train was not to blame. The coroner ended the proceedings with condolences to the next of kin and the court broke up.

Robert sought out Cromer. The two men shook hands gravely.

"I shall want to see you in a few days, Mr. Garry. As next of kin you must sign a few documents."

"Whenever you say. But I'd like to ask you—did my uncle send you a package in the last day or two? It would come from the cottage and would be registered. I don't know the size, but it would be fairly bulky."

Cromer's interest was plain but he did not ask questions.

"Nothing like that reached my office." It was the answer Robert expected but he could not help looking glum. "However," the solicitor went on, "it's odd you should ask. This morning I did get a letter for you. Posting it must have been one of the last things your uncle did. In a covering note he asked me to pass it on to you by hand. An unusual procedure, but here it is." He rummaged in his brief case and without examining the envelope Robert put it in his pocket.

Unusual procedure? It was because of the burglary, he thought. Uncle John wasn't going to risk a raid on my letter box.

Exercising enormous self-control, Robert determined not to look at the letter until he got home. Only when he was locked in the flat did he look at it closely. The familiar writing on the envelope, probably the last thing Uncle John set down, caused a pang, but he shook off the feeling and ripped open the envelope. It contained a single sheet of paper without address or date.

Dear Robert—Put it down to my fancy if you like, but I can't help feeling uneasy. You see, if anything happened to me things would be in a devil of a mess. Nobody else knows anything at all, except the people who shouldn't. So we really ought to have another talk. I hope to return to the cottage tonight. What a long time since you were down! Everything is looking lovely, especially the apple tree you are so fond of.

When I return from my travels I'll let you know what happened. But you'll agree with me that the only important thing now is to make the journey with the proper credentials.

Your affectionate uncle, John.

Darlow had not known—he could not know—but the smell of death was strong upon him when he wrote the note. It was an explanation, an appeal, and in its way an order. Sitting there with the paper loosely between his fingers Robert Garry knew what he must do now. After that it might be less clear.

CHAPTER 15

UNDER THE powerful lights of the Great West Road the car made good speed, but when Robert turned off from the main stream of traffic, he drove more slowly. A drizzle of rain made the surface slippery. At the last crossroads he glanced at his watch and noted with satisfaction that it was not yet ten o'clock.

The road was narrower now, with dark trees looming on both sides and showing yellow where they swept low in the headlights. Just ahead were the lights of the village. He skirted the green and halted in the lane running up the side of the churchyard. There was still some way to go before he reached the cottage, and he meant to get there silently and on foot. The place should be empty, but he could not be sure.

He took the field path and found the stile more by touch than by sight. The field was soggy, and he plodded cautiously, letting his eyes become used to the night. Ahead there was the dark mass of the copse, and now he could hear the gurgle of the stream.

His heart jumped. Beyond the wood was a glow. Motionless behind a knotted trunk he realized that the cottage was burning.

This was part two. The first move had been to get rid of Darlow before he could do anything about the information he possessed. It had been successful. Next came the information itself. They—the still unknown they—knew it was still at the cottage, and all the way down Robert had been prepared for signs of a search, but he had not expected this.

It settled one point. To the people, unknown, the important thing was not to possess the secret of the arms of Venus but to destroy it. Their motive was not gain but, in some way he could not guess at, fear.

And they had failed. Though the flames crackled they had failed. But they might still be watching, and he must move with care. He found the little path through the copse and came to the boundary fence of the orchard. The palings creaked as they took his weight and on the other side he stood still, alert for discovery.

Against the glow of the fire the black boughs of the apple trees twisted in confusion, and for a moment he wondered whether he would remember. About ten yards ahead . . . The apple tree—the apple tree—was several paces to the left. He remembered its configuration as clearly as on the day, many years ago, when he had shouted to his uncle in delighted discovery.

His fingers ran over the rough bark, reached up and found the familiar knotted limb. Behind it, snug and concealed, was the hollow, a dark, wholly satisfactory cache. Uncle John, having sworn bloodcurdling oaths of secrecy, had inspected it gravely and agreed that here one might conceal the most precious of treasures without fear of detection.

Robert eased himself round and crooked his arm into the hollow. His hand touched something cold and he withdrew it quickly to inspect the treasure trove. A pistol, old and rusted and of uncommon shape. It was a boy's air gun, hidden two decades ago and now retrieved by the owner who had long forgotten it. Robert laughed softly and slipped it into his pocket.

The second dip extracted something flat and smooth. Robert held a flat package about six inches long and four inches wide. The covering was of oiled silk, and wrapped loosely round it was a length of string. This was what a German archaeologist, now dead, had sent to John Darlow, and because he possessed it, John Darlow was also dead. Whoever had started the fire might still be hanging about.

Robert weighed the package in his hand and thought hard. He could slip it back into its hiding place, where it would not be discovered for years, and perhaps never at all. His connection with the affair would end, and Uncle John's story would gradually fade to nothing more than an uneasy fantasy. Or he could carry on where his uncle had left off, do as he would have wished. It was surely simple enough. And it would be keeping faith not only with his uncle but with all the civilized world. There in the shadow of the tree with the glow of the burning cottage before him Robert knew his choice had never been in doubt. He slipped the package into the wide pocket of his jacket and made his way back

cautiously. He reached the car and taking off the hand brake let it run backwards into the road. The engine started smoothly and he settled down to the long drive home. If Uncle John was beyond help, at least his work could go on.

It was not yet midnight and the road, though unfrequented, was the main route to London, so at first Robert was not certain. Judging by his driving mirror the other car was about a hundred yards behind, driving on side lights only and making no attempt to overtake. It kept its distance for several miles. To test his theory Robert slowed down and then speeded up. The car kept an even hundred yards behind.

He had been seen by the fire-raisers, but at what precise moment it was impossible to tell. Before he could adjust his mind to the thought they reached the bridge.

There was a prolonged blare of a horn and the car was upon him. Beyond the low wall on the left was blackness, ending (as Robert knew) in a shallow stream thirty feet below. His foot stamped the accelerator, throwing the car forward just as the other lunged into it. There was a blow against his back wheels that sent them spinning into the parapet. The steering wheel writhed between his hands and from the drag behind, it was clear that the two cars were locked together. Robert managed to pull up at right angles to the road and just beyond the murderous drop.

The car door was jammed and he bruised his fingers in wrenching it open. As soon as he was out the other man was upon him, heavy and silent. Robert went down under the impact, sobbing for breath and striving frantically to break the grip on his throat. As his hands wrestled with the wrists at his windpipe his legs thrashed wildly, heaving and kicking to get rid of the hard body above him, to hurt it, injure it, smash it.

His jerking knee came up and with exultation Robert heard the man grunt in pain, felt him give. Most blessed of all, the iron hands relaxed. He tore them apart and rolled clear; but the man was at him again. Viciously Robert kicked out. As they grappled and fell he found himself this time on top. He clawed at the man's hair, found a grip and gave the head a sharp crack on the road.

Robert took rapid and rueful stock. His throat ached abominably and his nose was sticky with blood. The drizzle of rain had become heavier in the last half hour and his jacket was soaked. Jacket . . . In panic he clapped his hand to the pocket and gasped with relief as he felt the bulk of the package.

His head was clearing, and he could think. Even in the darkness he had a rough idea of the geography of the dripping countryside. The road swept round in a wide curve of about a mile before reaching a village. In a direct line from where he was the distance would be halved.

The direct line, in darkness on a wet night, was full of hazards. He slogged through ploughland and wiry rushes which were waist high. He skirted a wood, and on the farther side stumbled over rows of some unidentified root crop.

But there were lights ahead, and help at last. There would be a police station where he could tell his story.

But would he do that? The first decision—to carry on where Uncle John left off—had been easy. The second one, which he must take within the next few moments, was more complex. To describe the attack would mean explaining it, and to explain it would mean dragging in a mass of detail which made no sense. The certainties in his own mind were absolute. Someone was so anxious to destroy the secret of the arms of Venus that John Darlow was killed. The same someone had made a determined effort to kill Darlow's nephew, Robert Garry, himself. So much he knew. But of proof or even evidence he had not one scrap.

He had the papers that contained the secret of the arms of Venus, and he had beaten off a determined attack on his life. Wet and cold and aching as he was, he reflected again that so far he had managed very well on his own.

The door of the police station was opened by a stout man in blue trousers and wide braces, who appeared on the point of going to bed.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," said Robert, "but there's been a car accident down the road."

"Anybody hurt?"

"Not seriously—that is, you won't need an ambulance."

"Come in, sir." The policeman led the way into a room which seemed to combine the functions of charge room and front parlour. Robert sank in a chair and outlined the surface facts. The constable listened attentively.

"And the other gentleman—you've left him by the car?"

Damn. Where *was* the other gentleman?

"I expect he's still there. I was a bit knocked up, you know."

"Quite so, sir. That's why you came across the fields, I'll be bound." Splendid fellow for finding a reason.

There was a knock at the door.

Robert guessed wildly. It couldn't be and yet it was. The confirmation made him want to laugh out loud.

A rasping voice said, "I want to report an accident."

"Yes, sir, I've just heard about it."

For the first time Robert saw the man clearly, and knew him. It was Teplitz.

"You've met Mr. Garry," the policeman said. Teplitz gave a perfunctory nod.

"If he is the driver of the other car, one may say we have met. I wish to say at once the fault was mine. I was overtaking and I misjudged the distance."

The policeman registered mild pleasure. "Very forthright of you, sir. It will save a lot of argument later on."

"That is my intention," Teplitz said gravely.

In the routine matters that followed—summoning a garage-man and parking the cars in the village for the night—Robert took care not to stray far from the policeman. In the end it was done. The policeman said, "The night train to London stops five miles down the line in about half an hour." The sulky garage proprietor, with the air of one to whom nothing more can happen, undertook to drive them to the station. Robert found himself sharing the back of the car with the man who had so recently made single-minded efforts to kill him. Bizarre as the situation was, at least it gave him his first chance to talk, the glass screen shielding their voices from the driver....

"Are you allowed to tell me why?" he asked.

Teplitz answered directly. "You have something which does not belong to you. Or you know where it is. If you give it to me, you will be troubled no more. If you possess it and do not give it to me, you will be killed." The tones were matter-of-fact.

"And if I tell you I haven't any idea what you are talking about."

Teplitz' smile was brief and ironic. "Until tonight you could have said such a thing. But now, I do not think so."

He was right. Robert had resolved to play ignorant, and only now the flaw struck him, the great clumsy fact that made nonsense of the notion. Suppose he did know nothing. Suppose he were an ordinary man in a car who found himself in a crash and then viciously assaulted. What would his first action be on reaching a police station? He would spill out the whole outrageous story. And when the other man walked in? An excited denunciation. Instead he had kept silent. Whether he liked it or not, Robert was now in the affair with both feet.

His obvious safeguard was company; and at that hour the station was disconcertingly lonely. He allowed Teplitz to precede him to the booking office, where a sleepy clerk gave him a first-class ticket to London. Robert bought a third; he was much more likely to find travelling companions in the third class. Until the train came he lounged within easy reach of the booking clerk.

He heard the train approach but did not budge until it stopped. Then he opened the nearest door and what he saw gave him an enormous sense of security. Along one side of the compartment a young soldier lay sleeping. Opposite him, half reading a magazine, was another soldier. Robert took the vacant corner.

When they reached Paddington it was the dead hour of four o'clock. Teplitz was ahead of him, waving for a taxi. It did seem as though the murder business had put up shutters for the time being. Robert watched the taxi disappear, then made for the taxi rank himself. He reached Hampstead without incident. His relief took the form of a tip of such dimensions that the driver was reminded of the dear dead days of the Americans.

CHAPTER 16

MY DEAR DARLOW,
To save you from looking first at the end of my letter I will tell you at once it is Ernst Spielter who writes to you. How much we used to correspond in the old days! The writing is different now, is it not? I am older than when we argued so fiercely about the Apollo of the Belvedere. Also, I am dying. To be accurate, I am dead, for until my death the bank will not post this letter.

The facts of the discovery I am to tell you of will speak for themselves, and my purpose now is to explain the circumstances. My work in Greece lasted two years. With me was a colleague whom you know. Though I recall you disliked him, you have always been compelled by honesty to admit his ability—I might say his genius. I speak of Hersfeld, Baron von Hersfeld.

For us in Germany, who after 1940 had a continent at our feet, the war was a much greater opportunity than it was for you, cooped in your crowded islands. To Hersfeld and me Greece, of course, was no strange country, but never before had we been able to work so thoroughly and unhampered. With the co-operation of the German army we had no trouble in acquiring manpower for our digging. And there was none of that tedious negotiation with the Greek authorities about the ownership of what we discovered. You may say it was an archaeologist's paradise. The island of Melos was almost an accidental choice. The field is rich, but it has been worked over many times since the Aphrodite was discovered. However, Hersfeld was confident that new works were still to be found and his enthusiasm persuaded me.

It was on an afternoon in October 1944 that our Greek foreman pointed out to Hersfeld and me a niche behind the one on which we were working. An inscribed block over the cavity gave us the first hint. It was battered and worn but we could distinguish the name "Alexandros," and I need not remind you that Alexandros, son of Menides of Antioch, is accepted today as the sculptor of the Aphrodite. We worked fast but carefully, and the first thing we unearthed gave us more evidence. It was a small terminal figure of Apollo, of common bluish marble, and beyond doubt a fellow of the two similar figures that were discovered with the Aphrodite.

Were we to find a new work by Alexandros? The truth, you may be

sure, never came to our minds. And then the discovery! Even then we did not believe; there have been clumsy imitations of the arms of the incomparable Venus. But as we examined these pieces the realization came slowly. At first neither of us dared to speak the thought.

There is no need to repeat here the tests we applied—on the age of the work, its texture and the quality of the sculpture. We worked from memory and knowledge, it is true, since the Aphrodite was a thousand miles away in the Louvre. But for us that was no more difficult than for a woman to match ribbons.

We told the foreman nothing, except to crate the new discoveries with the old, and it was apparent from his manner that he had no notion of what his men were packing away. What a pity it was, we felt, that the Allies had so recently been able to occupy Paris. It might be six months before our army returned there and we could restore the glorious Aphrodite to her original state and so earn the thanks of the world. For this we were determined to do.

The commandant in Athens accepted our word that we had made discoveries of incalculable value to the Reich and promised us an escort as far as the Yugoslav border. After that we must make what arrangements we could with the local army units we found there. This was unsatisfactory, and Hersfeld put his views strongly. The commandant was polite but firm; he could spare us two trucks and twenty men. That should be sufficient to ward off guerrillas, who were a serious nuisance in the mountains, but he warned us there was nothing except luck to protect us from air attack. Luftwaffe units in Greece had already been withdrawn and divided between the eastern and western fronts, and British fighter bombers roamed the area at will.

A detachment of troops under a young captain reported to our hotel. They unloaded the crates from the trucks that had brought them from Piraeus and loaded them on to their own lorries. We were careful to see that *the* crate (which had no special marks to distinguish it) was in the centre, where in case of disaster it would come to least harm. But our forebodings persisted. They were justified. On a dusty white road not forty kilometres from Athens there came a sudden terrifying roar and a swoop, a blaze of guns, and within seconds three separate fountains of earth. No harm was done, but Hersfeld was harsh with anger, and I was weak and shaking with fright. This once we had escaped, but in the hundreds of kilometres which lay ahead it was unlikely and perhaps impossible that we should be so lucky every time. One of the

noblest conceptions of the mind of man, discovered after two thousand years, was at the mercy of any young lout in an aeroplane.

Our duty above all others was to safeguard it. Since we could not take the crates with us we must conceal them until the armies of the Reich overcame their setbacks and again swept over a conquered Europe. Hersfeld consulted the captain out of my hearing, and the plan was made. Some forty kilometres from Athens there was a small marble quarry which had every sign of having been deserted years ago. This was ideal for our purpose.

But now there arose an unexpected difficulty. The captain's men were crack panzer grenadiers. They would if necessary fight like devils and die; but they would not dig a trench for our crates. The Baron understood that such an idea was unthinkable, reducing the *élite* of the German army at a stroke to something akin to a foreign labour corps. He dispatched the captain to round up some native labour.

The captain returned with a dozen Greek villagers, ragged, hairy fellows who glowered in silence. Under Hersfeld's direction the Greeks unloaded the crates and carried them to the quarry. The digging took longer than I had expected, but by the time the sun was low the work was done. We returned to the trucks and made a careful note of our position; the kilometre stone from Athens, the path down the valley, and the name of the village where our labourers lived. It would not be difficult to find the place again. "Nor necessary," I said. "I do not doubt that we shall return, but by then the place will have been overrun by the British. Do you imagine these Greeks will keep silent?"

Hersfeld was in good humour again, his monocle gleaming with satisfaction. He patted my hand and told me to climb aboard and not worry. Night was falling when we stopped again. As I got out of the cab I saw at once the reason for Hersfeld's confidence. In the dusk there was a rattle of weapons as the soldiers formed two lines, one kneeling. Ten paces in front of them was another line, though less precise—our labourers. The captain gave the order, there was a crash of fire and a tumbled heap. Nobody gave so much as a twitch.

I confess that I shared Hersfeld's relief. My concern all along had been the safety of the arms of Venus, and to know that the treasure was safe more than compensated for any unpleasantness as regards the Greeks. I looked forward with eagerness to the day we should return.

But that was not to be. It is not for me to examine the reasons why

the war ended as it did. For me when the end came there was still my old profession of teaching. It has brought me little enough—if you knew how poor, torn Germany has suffered—but for an old scholar not much is needed to keep alive. How much longer I shall live I cannot say. My health is poor, and that is not all. Lately I have been the victim, or almost the victim, of several unusual accidents. There was a falling coping stone, a car driving much too fast—I will not weary you with the details. Perhaps I fancy things. But should anything happen to me you will receive this letter. While I am alive I am reluctant to share the secret of the Aphrodite with anyone, but if I should die it is you, my old colleague and teacher, whom I would wish to benefit from my work. Let the glory be yours, and from the grave I salute you and wish you good fortune.

Hersfeld I have not met since our return to Germany, though I have read about him in the newspapers. He has been more successful than I, but he is a man of stronger character and greater influence.

The directions for finding the spot where we buried our treasure are attached. They will not convey much until you are in Greece, but starting from Athens you should have no trouble in finding the place. As a colleague, may I commend to you Patianos, of Athens University.

Good-bye, dear friend. I entrust to you a secret which should be no secret, but the wonder of the world and all who love beauty. It is for you to make it so, and to give to mankind the complete Aphrodite.

Ernst Spielter

ROBERT did not like Spielter much, for all his "dear colleague" talk. He was not as ruthless as Hersfeld, certainly, but no credit lay in that. There was no word to show either horror or disgust or even disapproval. It never occurred to him that the shooting of a dozen Greeks was anything more than a necessity.

But it *was* more than that, and if Spielter was not aware of it, Baron von Hersfeld was. He was sufficiently aware of it to make sure that his colleagues said nothing about it. Since the war there were Allied organizations to pass judgment on such matters. They aroused some indignation. It was surely bad enough to be a member of a defeated nation, without having bygones labelled as "war crimes," "atrocities," and even "genocide." One heard of the most unlikely people arraigned on charges of this kind and quite fre-

quently they were found guilty and hanged. Baron von Hersfeld would be in no doubt that his summary disposal of the Greek labourers would be reviewed unfavourably if it were known.

So Spielter had to die. But in spite of that the papers came to John Darlow. So Darlow had to die as well, and his home was burned to the ground to destroy the evidence hidden in it. But John Darlow's premonition of doom, using Robert as an instrument, had foiled this attempt and so Robert had to die, too.

Was Teplitz, the Czech, in reality Baron von Hersfeld, the German archaeologist? The picture of the dapper aristocrat had nothing in common with the lowering brute who had attacked him. But Teplitz worked for Hersfeld.

Now for the first time Robert knew his enemy. He reflected on it with a queer new excitement. At last he had some notion of what he was up against and why. Events that had been without pattern now had meaning, and if they were still charged with menace, there was a relief in seeing the threat clear and whole. How to deal with it was another matter. Thoughtfully he folded the letter. Appended to the last page were some scribbled directions and figures. Here in a Hampstead flat they conveyed nothing, but once he reached Athens the case would be altered.

CHAPTER 17

IN THE morning he telephoned the office and asked for some leave to clear up personal affairs. Hanson at once showed a heavy understanding of his uncle's death and advised him to get right away. He had scarcely replaced the telephone when it rang.

"Robert Garry? This is Larry Winster." The name rang a bell. Yes, that was it! The "friend of a friend" who had come to his party, who had been Uncle John's shadow on the day of his death. "I was wondering whether you could lunch with me. Sorry about the short notice. If you have an appointment can you break it? It's cheek of me to ask, but I do want to see you urgently and introduce a friend."

The wild thought crossed his mind. "What friend?"

"Perhaps you know him by name. He used to know your uncle well. Baron von Hersfeld." The voice was urbane. "We thought Borelli's at one."

They must imagine he was insane. But wait a moment, Borelli's would be crowded and therefore quite safe. He said steadily, "If it's as urgent as you say, one o'clock suits me quite well."

"Glad you can manage it." Larry sounded relieved.

When they had rung off Robert lit a cigarette and saw that his fingers were shaking. Hersfeld was coming into the open with a confidence that seemed ominous. The fact that he used his own name indicated that he had nothing to fear. He wanted to come to grips with Robert personally, to find out the sort of person he had to deal with. Which was fine, because Robert wanted the same thing. He would let Hersfeld set the pace.

Robert made his way to the West End. He exercised the care which was becoming habitual and took a roundabout way to the restaurant. He shouldered his way through the swing door and saw Winster talking to the girl at the cash desk. He greeted Robert cheerfully and steered him to a reserved table.

"The Baron will be here soon. I told him one-fifteen. You don't mind?" He passed across the wine list. "He's touchy, and I had to allow that you might be a little late."

"I don't mind." Indeed, the stage management gave him confidence. The other side were not sure of themselves and were out to impress him. Robert ordered a sherry and sat back. The restaurant was crowded and the hubbub so mixed that it was possible to talk across the table quite privately. "I didn't know Germans were keen on Italian food."

"You won't find the Baron overwhelmingly Teutonic." There was a touch of irony in Winster's voice. He suddenly jumped to his feet. "Here he is."

It should have been dramatic, this meeting, but it was as ordinary as it must have appeared to the waiter. Larry exchanged their names, they shook hands briefly and sat down.

Baron von Hersfeld was tall and thin. His build was combined with a grave courtesy of manner that made him oddly formid-

able. One felt immediately that his air of authority was deeply ingrained; that he himself took it for granted but would not lightly exert it. His English was as nearly perfect as it could be for one whose earliest language was something else.

Robert said, "I understand I ought to know more about you than I do. You must forgive me."

The Baron raised a deprecating hand. "Outside my own field I am unknown. But as my work is similar to that of your uncle, it was possible he had mentioned my name."

"He didn't."

Winster put in, "Baron von Hersfeld is the leading art authority in Europe. That's why A.M.G. gave him his job."

"A.M.G.?"

"I forgot." There was something unpleasant about the smile. "You were never in Germany, were you? Allied Military Government, the people who have been running the show." Whether an insult was intended or not, Robert flushed. In a rash of savagery he told himself, I took care of Teplitz and I can do the same for you, big as you are.

Hersfeld said gently, "Perhaps I may explain that I was engaged by the victors after the war to use my specialized knowledge. During hostilities a great many art treasures were removed to Germany. That, of course, has always been the custom during war. Napoleon and your Duke of Wellington were both enthusiastic collectors. However, Germany lost the war and what she acquired must be returned. The task is complex, because some of the victor nations are prone to imagine they have been deprived of more than they have really lost."

"You deal with these matters?"

Hersfeld smiled. "As I said, my knowledge is specialized. I know better than most people what was owned by Germany before the war and what has been acquired since. I am also credited with knowing where certain treasures can be found. You may recall that the late Marshal Göring hid away some pictures of value in the galleries of a Bavarian mine. He consulted me at the time about the damp; so when the shooting ended I was naturally

in a position to indicate where those pictures were."

"A.M.G.," Robert glanced at Winster, "must have found you useful."

"It did, and it does," said Hersfeld. "I emphasize 'does.' My work is far from complete, and I should not like it to be interrupted."

"Is there any chance of that?"

The Baron swung his monocle from its silk. Robert noticed that when he had something of importance to say he first performed some trivial physical act. He replaced the monocle in his eye and looked across the table bleakly. "Teplitz is a fool. His attack was badly timed, unnecessary, and worse still, unsuccessful. But it proved one thing. You made no complaint to the police of this unexpected and savage assault. Therefore you knew the reason for it."

The point Robert had made to himself on the way home.

Hersfeld continued, "I have a position that is useful from every point of view, and to lose it would benefit no one. But your notions of democracy are odd. Valuable as my work is, my career could be jeopardized by idiotic scandal-mongering, whispers of things that are over and done with and cannot be changed. I think you know what I mean."

It was useless to pretend any more. Hersfeld knew. Robert said casually, "Whispers of killing a bunch of harmless Greeks?"

Hersfeld gave a grim little smile of appreciation at having drawn this frankness. "You may put it so. Let us take away the tinge of prejudice and you are right. It was wartime and it happened. To be plain, I was confident that we should be back in Athens in a few months, and in that case my precautions would be justified." He leaned forward and held up a thin finger. "Let me say at once that for me there is no higher good than giving to the world what is beautiful and immortal. With the Aphrodite of Melos I planned to do exactly that."

"The discovery was surely enough. Why hide it?"

Hersfeld's thin lips twisted slightly. "Tell me this. If *you* had discovered this thing, and the Germans were upon you, would you willingly yield it?"

"I don't think I should have murdered a dozen men."

"A dozen?" Hersfeld sighed as he received the answer to another question. "Only Spielter knew that, and he is dead."

"Did you kill him, too?" He might as well know.

"He was ill and probably dying anyway." The German brushed the point aside. "But he passed on the knowledge to your uncle, who passed it on to you. The matter I must be satisfied about is this: What means did your uncle use? You see the importance of the question?" Robert did, but he merely said, "Tell me." Hersfeld's expression was patient.

"When your uncle visited you on the night of your party, perhaps he told you Spielter's story. Perhaps he left the evidence at the cottage, and it was destroyed in the fire. In that case the story is idle hearsay with no shred of proof. But there is the other possibility." He leaned forward. "Your uncle may have told you of some hiding place where he put the Spielter papers for safety. If that happened, then I must have them. If you find and hand them over to me, the matter is at an end. If not, I shall be compelled to make sure you observe discretion."

Sipping his coffee Robert said, "I don't propose to tell you anything of my uncle's affairs or my own. I find it impertinent that you should think I would." With satisfaction he saw the Baron's colour was rising. "It seems I am the first person you've tackled who knew what he was up against, and I think that gives me an advantage over your friend Spielter and my uncle. Another thing." He managed to keep his voice steady. "I intend to make sure that those responsible for my uncle's death are suitably punished. Primarily you, Baron." He got up. "Thank you for lunch, and I trust you will understand if I don't return the invitation."

CHAPTER 18

THE JOURNEY to Athens was dream-like. Secrecy, of course, was essential if he was to escape the attentions of his new enemies. Travelling on a forged passport—secured at no more trouble than a considerable payment in cash to a disreputable acquaintance

who knew of a market in such things—he proceeded to Paris, where he spent the night. Then the early morning flight to Rome—the brief pause, and then—Athens.

He had ample time to compose the genealogy of his passport personality. The photograph was his own; but the new name, he discovered with some amusement, was Scrivener and he forthwith decided to be a journalist. To his relief, the airport official in Athens who stamped his passport raised no difficult questions.

The bus rattled up the long stretch of Phaleron Road. Robert was sitting next to a stout man of middle age who had boarded the plane at Rome. Judging from the cut of his clothes he was American. When he spoke his voice confirmed it.

"You staying at the Britannic?"

"I haven't booked."

"Me neither, but it's a pretty big place."

"You know it?"

"I've been here a couple of times. Greece, Italy, France. Back and forth, working my backside off for Uncle Sam. Europe borrows the dollars and we hand 'em out. You on business?"

Robert assumed his new personality. "I'm a journalist."

"I guess you find plenty to write about in this poor old post-war world. It's pretty sick." Unexpectedly he thrust out his hand. "Tom Peppercorn. I'm from Missouri. Have you been here before, Mr. . . .? I didn't get your name."

"Robert Scrivener. It's my first visit."

The bus skirted the royal palace and Constitution Square and pulled up at the hotel. A sleek clerk welcomed Mr. Peppercorn in fluent English. For him there was—of course!—a room, but otherwise . . . He shrugged. However, if the other gentleman was a friend of Mr. Peppercorn's perhaps it could be managed.

"I can never figure out," said the American as they got into the lift, "whether it's just the dollars or whether they really like us. I didn't get it all at first—the jabber, jabber, the way they work out their emotions, the chiselling. But now, hell, I'm coming around to liking them. That's what travel does for you." They parted in the corridor with a friendly wave of the hand.

Robert liked the air of space and coolness about his room, and when he had washed and changed his shirt the fatigue of the journey fell from him. He transferred the package containing the Spielter papers from his jacket to the suitcase and locked it away, in the wardrobe, hiding the key on the top.

Downstairs the bar was crowded with men drinking cocktails before dinner. Many were in uniform, British and American, and the talk was mainly in English. It might have been one of a dozen places in London. Peppercorn was ordering a drink and, when he saw Robert standing uncertainly at the door, he called him over.

"You'll be kind of lost at first," he said affably. "I'd be happy to have you dine with me. Drink?"

"You're very good." Robert was glad of the company. "I'd like a word with the reception clerk first."

He went into the hall. After a brief search the clerk told him Professor Patianos, the art expert recommended by Spielter, was not on the telephone. But if the gentleman cared to write a note, a messenger could deliver it without delay. Robert scribbled a dozen lines and sent them off.

Peppercorn ordered expertly and ate without visible satisfaction the best meal Robert had seen for years. He talked of Greece with the air of an indulgent guardian. One gathered the Greeks were a wayward, childlike lot, given to sudden passions and bouts of intense idleness but not unwilling to learn about the American way of life. Under constant supervision they were at last beginning to appreciate the advantages of efficiency, a schedule of public works and the care of machinery. Mr. Peppercorn's face clouded as he touched on the last point. He had a macabre story of bulldozers being run without oil until the gears congealed and the telling of it quite put him off his coffee.

"They must have a long way to go to catch up," Robert said by way of comfort.

"They sure have. And I'll say this for them: when they get in the mood to work they sweat at it. You got to show them the need, see. I'll tell you. This is what? Friday. Sunday I'm off out of town on a trip that illustrates what I mean. As a journalist you'd

find in it plenty of material to show what we are doing to help the Greeks and what they are doing to help themselves. If you'd care to come along I'd be glad to have you."

Robert said doubtfully, "I have rather a lot of engagements."

"Naturally so. If you can make it, let me know. Waiter!" Against Robert's protests he insisted on signing the bill.

"I asked you and it doesn't hurt me any. When I was your age I was always glad for some old guy to pay my check." He looked up and spoke with genuine pleasure. "Why, hello there."

Robert noted that the man was about his own age, but taller and more burly. Despite his civilian clothing the set of his shoulders was military. He paused at Peppercorn's greeting.

"If it isn't Father Christmas, back with a sackful of dollars for the good little Greeks."

"Cut it out." Far from taking offence, the American was beaming. "You had dinner?"

"At the club, but you can buy me a drink."

"Then sit down. I'd like to have you meet Mr. Robert Scrivener. He's a journalist."

"How-do-you-do."

"And this is Major Paul Saxton."

The man nodded pleasantly. "Not any more. Plain mister now. What's your paper, Mr. Scrivener?"

Why hadn't he thought of this? "No paper. Magazine articles and so forth. I'm a free-lance."

"We have a number of press chaps in Athens, quite apart from the residents. There's Edmunds of the *Globe*, and Grant of the *Banner*, and last week we had Drayton of the *Echo*. A funny little cuss, isn't he?"

"Very. You talk like a journalist yourself."

"I had a spell in the press office at the Embassy."

Peppercorn said, "It wasn't exciting enough for him. Nothing is, nowadays. If you happen to know of anything, Mr. Scrivener, I'd be glad to have him off my hands."

Saxton explained. "I work for this character. The idea is to see that his dollars get to the people who appreciate them."

"Hear him." Peppercorn chuckled. "Just because he speaks the crazy language he figures he knows all the angles. Horse trading is horse trading, however you spell it. But maybe he can help you, Mr. Scrivener."

"I'll be glad to do anything I can." His glance, it seemed to Robert, was speculative, and it made him feel uncomfortable.

"Are you staying long?"

"That depends on some of my contacts. If all goes well, perhaps I shall be here for a few weeks."

"You sound thorough. Most of our visiting journalists average a day and a half." Again the cool look of appraisal. Robert disliked the fellow.

"If you'll excuse me," he said, getting up, "I'll go for a stroll round. Any advice on that, Mr. Saxton?"

"Two things. Don't listen to touts, and keep out of side streets." His matter-of-fact reply blunted the irony of the question.

"If it's hoodlums," Peppercorn said breezily, "Saxton has the answers. See you tomorrow."

"Good night."

"One more word." Saxton spoke briskly. "It's a main road all the way and don't you let anyone tell you differently."

"All the way to where?"

"Aren't you going to the Acropolis?"

"You mean, everybody does."

"Practically everybody." Unexpectedly he smiled, a warm smile that changed his face. But I still don't like him, Robert told himself. And if he knows I am going to the Acropolis, he doesn't know why. Not by a million miles.

HE SLEPT late next morning and was awakened by the telephone. A metallic voice announced, "Patianos. Welcome to our country, Mr. Scrivener. We shall meet today, at the Minerva Café in the Street of Angels. You will remember that and find it. At eight o'clock. Good-bye."

The peremptory manner was either amusing or riling; he was not sure which. Robert slept again until the maid came in with

her master key and made it clear he should be up.

Robert discovered that Athens enthralled and delighted him. He spent a hot, tiring and completely fascinating day among its noise, its smells, its movement and colour, and the white stillness of its monuments. The spell was still upon him as evening came, and he could not face a return to the Anglo-American atmosphere of the hotel. He dined quietly and well in a little garden behind Concord Square until it was time to go.

In the dusk large lamps gleamed down on the cobbled road and the jangling trams. But the third turning on the right was darker and quieter, the gloom broken only by pools of light from the shops and cafés.

The Minerva was the most pretentious building in the street, its name picked out in winking yellow lights. Two or three of the tables on the pavement were occupied and Robert hesitated before choosing a seat near the entrance to the café. Uneasily he felt something was missing, and then he realized what it was. All day he had been within sight and sound of British or American men in uniform. Their khaki peppered the background and (he knew now) gave him a sense of well-being. He knew now, because here in the Street of the Angels there was none.

A waiter looked at him inquiringly and he ordered beer. At the English voice the man flashed a wide smile and disappeared. He was back in a moment and beckoning.

"Professor Patianos?" Robert asked.

"Yes, mister. Please . . ." He was tumbling over his feet, backing into the café with exaggerated gestures of welcome.

Robert followed the waiter past the shining bar, through the café and into a room at the rear. It was dingy, with peeling wall-paper and a greasy cooking range that smelled of stale fat.

The man who got up to greet him was in striking contrast to the surroundings. He was of medium height, slim, with sleek hair brushed back over a high forehead. His plain grey suit and cream shirt, even in this light, were plainly expensive.

"Good evening. Please sit down, Mr. Scrivener." He clapped his hands, and the waiter appeared with a bottle of pale wine,



two glasses, and a saucer of sardine-like fish. The man speared one with a fork and held it out invitingly.

"No, thank you. I am looking for Professor Patianos."

"You are sure you will not eat? Then you will drink." Robert took the glass and sipped, his eyes still on his host. The unconcealed suspicion seemed to amuse the man and he laughed.

"As you surmise, I am not Professor Patianos; indeed, I am not a professor of any kind. My name is Kronopoulos."

"It was you who telephoned?"

"It was I, Mr. Garry."

Mr. Garry. Robert felt sick. This was like a blow in the stomach.

As though reading his thoughts Kronopoulos said, "You should not be discouraged. My cables from London indicate that your departure caused much dismay. But however devious your journey, it could have only one end—Athens. We set the watch and you arrived, the one person who answered our description."

As simple as that. And Robert had walked straight into a dive

where it appeared that a knifed body more or less would arouse no comment. "I should tell you, Mr. Kronopoulos, that it is known at my hotel that I have come here."

"Ah, you suspected. It is an unusual meeting place for people like you and me, and I share your distaste for it. But it has its uses."

"I can imagine some of them."

"No, no." He raised a protesting hand. "I am not addicted to violence, and I am not equipped for it."

"Unlike your friend Baron von Hersfeld."

Kronopoulos shrugged. "He is my employer in this matter, and it is not my place to criticize. But at present I have permission to pursue my own methods, and it is my opinion that they are better. Mr. Scrivener—I will keep to your new name—you have something that does not belong to you. I do not threaten you because I do not believe you are moved by threats." Robert waited tensely. "I offer to buy it from you." He smiled blandly.

Robert laughed loud in relief and the Greek went on hastily. "Please do not refuse at once. You have an income that I believe is comfortable, but you are not a wealthy man." He stopped and lifted a small leather case on to the table.

"Here there are five hundred golden sovereigns, and I offer them to you in return for the papers that Spielter wrote."

"You know about him, too. And what he wrote?"

"Merely that it was something dangerous to the Baron."

"You sound fond of him."

He shrugged impatiently. "It is business, purely. I serve his interests. I do not press you for a decision at the moment, but perhaps by tomorrow you will let me know your answer."

"You might as well hear it now. No."

Patently the Greek explained. "The gold pound is today worth twenty-seven times the paper pound. That is the quotation, but twenty-seven notes would not buy a sovereign. And all the time the value goes up. Now do you understand what I offer you?"

The waiter came in from the café and said something in Greek. He seemed excited. Kronopoulos snapped at him. The waiter rolled his eyes to heaven, flung up his arms in despair and retired

defeated. Kronopoulos resumed his seat. "The man sees bogies round every corner. Do you know why I chose to meet you here? Because the police are paid well to keep away, and this," he indicated the case, "can be carried without arousing curiosity."

"It would be rude to ask where you got it."

"Rude, and of no importance. The sovereigns cannot possibly be traced to me, or to you, if you accept them."

"I won't."

Kronopoulos spoke gently but there was a glint in his dark eyes and his colour heightened. "You do not attach the same importance to money as I do. To an Englishman that may indicate a pure mind, but to a Greek it is merely foolishness. Especially when one considers the alternative."

"You promised not to threaten me, Mr. Kronopoulos."

He smiled thinly. "I will keep my word. But please consider this. What was difficult for the Baron in London may not be so difficult in Athens, where you are a stranger and our standards of behaviour are not the same."

He poured some more wine, and pushed Robert's glass across the table. "I do not expect you to concur now, because by doing so you would lose face. But if you visit my office in Patissia Street tomorrow I shall understand perfectly that you have changed your mind without any outside pressure."

Robert got to his feet. "I have enjoyed our talk better than I expected when we met. Now I must bid you good evening."

The Greek gave him a searching look, as though to pry out whether he had been sufficiently persuasive, and also stood up. "I am at the office from ten till one and from five till seven. There is no need——"

Without warning there was a sudden uproar from the café, a bedlam of shouting voices and overturned furniture. The shouts quickly changed to shrill screams, and there was a thud of blows.

Robert and Kronopoulos had just time to exchange a startled glance before the lights went out. Someone crashed into the room and against the table. It upended with a crash, sending Robert sprawling. Behind him was heavy breathing and a noise suggest-

ing that two bodies were in a fierce grapple. He got to his knees and then to his feet. In the gloom he could make out a wall waist-high. He rolled over it and found himself in an alley with a floor of hard earth. Crouching, he scuttered along under the shelter of the wall and into a street. To the left a crowd was gathered round the entrance to the café.

Not until he approached the lights of Concord Square did he realize that he was carrying in his right hand the little leather case that contained five hundred sovereigns.

As he took his key the clerk handed him a note. He stuffed it into his pocket unread and made quickly for his room, the case pulling at his arm like a lump of lead. Safely behind his door he eased a penknife under the hasp and after a little levering the lock snapped.

Kronopoulos had been speaking the truth.

In silent dismay he gazed at the money. There was no point in cursing his idiocy in having it; the thing to decide was what to do with it now. He pulled himself up sharply. The answer was easy. In the morning he would return the case to the office in Patissia Street. That was not the problem at all.

He remembered the note and read it. So Patianos, the real Patianos, was not available for ten days. But this was only Friday, and in the next few days many things could happen. They would almost certainly be unpleasant.

The immediate problem was the safety of the package that had brought him to Greece. The wardrobe, locked or not, would not do any more. He frowned in thought. His uncle had had the right idea—somewhere simple but safe, like the apple tree. But this was a strange country of which he knew practically nothing. Yet he must do something without delay, this very evening. . . .

He slipped the package into his pocket and went downstairs.

He knew where he was going and walked rapidly. It was two hours before he returned, feeling tired but exultant. Then something hit him hard on the head and he lost consciousness.

The End Is Battle

CHAPTER 19

AS THE setting sun threw huge shadows across the Acropolis, pictures and recollections crowded back with overwhelming, agonizing compulsion. Robert Scrivener became Robert Garry and faced the half circle of his friends and enemies: Saxton, Jane, von Hersfeld, Teplitz, Winster, Kronopoulos. It happened in no more time than it takes to register a twinge of indigestion, and it aroused no more concern.

Only the girl knew. As he uttered the unremarkable words of introduction she stared at him wide-eyed.

How pitiful now seemed his wanderings and groping, the dread of disclosing his plight. Yet he had succeeded. He had staved off Kronopoulos, found an ally in Saxton, and retreated to an island refuge; all without knowing why. And though they had tracked him down in the end he was still alive and still master of the secret the German would kill him to possess.

It was the first time Robert had seen his enemies together, and in his new-found knowledge it was not difficult to assign them their rôles. Winster counted for little. Teplitz, the Czech, was more formidable; a strong-arm man from the scrap heap of Central Europe, accustomed all his life to inexplicable violence, accepting it without question and executing it without pity.

Both were subordinate to the brain of Kronopoulos. And behind Kronopoulos was the ultimate enemy. Stiff and dapper, Baron von Hersfeld stood erect, and as he moved his head in acknowledgment of the introductions the rimless monocle flashed back the rays of the sinking sun.

Saxton? For the first time Robert could look to Saxton other than as a nurse and protector. Good old Paul; I owe a lot to you, more than you will ever realize. I am grateful for your loyalty.

Without you perhaps I could not have survived at all. You will remain my friend, but henceforth I rely on myself.

And the girl. It had been good to talk; more than good: necessary. If it was the voice of Hersfeld that restored his mind so painfully, talking had helped, and loosened his mental muscles for the first time for months, conditioned him for the revelation.

But stronger than any other feeling was this: he was no longer afraid. In England and during his flight he had been uncertain of his ability to fight back. During the period without memory fear was inevitable; but it had not robbed him of the initiative. And now, in his right mind, he felt for the first time ready to give battle. Perhaps he would not win, but he would not be afraid.

In the shadow of the great gateway he said to Saxton, "It was clever of you to know I was here."

"One of your favourite haunts, isn't it? I heard after lunch you had changed your mind and left the island. When I dropped in on Mr. Kronopoulos and his friends, the Baron hoped he would meet you again as soon as possible. So here we are."

Hersfeld said with a slight bow, "We did not expect to find you in such charming company. I fear we are interrupting. But later I hope I may discuss one or two matters with you."

Robert was cool. "Such as the death of my uncle?" He explained to Saxton, "Teplitz killed him and tried to kill me. I believe I am not expected to feel any resentment."

The German smiled but his voice grated. "The months of sunshine appear to have enlivened your spirits. But our affairs must bore Miss Arden. It is better to defer them." Before she could reply Saxton spoke for them both. He had no idea what had put into Robert this sudden spirit of attack, but he approved. "*I'm* not bored. You must tell me who else you have murdered."

Only Robert understood why Hersfeld's face twisted so savagely. Only he of those present could picture the twilight scene as a German order barked out, and a line of ragged Greek labourers tumbled in death.

The German regained control. Saxton's facetiousness had told him something, that he was not in Robert's confidence. Nor, quite

clearly, was the girl. It looked as though the problem was, after all, no more complicated than it had been in London. Once Robert Garry was dealt with, the secret would die with him.

Winster felt it was time he asserted himself. He said to Saxton, "You talk too much, and I don't like your jokes."

"Carefully, Mr. Winster." The Baron was smooth. "Major Saxton has a formidable war record. It would be very rash indeed to make him cross."

"More than you can say for his pal here," said Winster.

Robert hit him, not scientifically but hard, and he crashed on his back across the edge of the broad marble steps. His legs waved wildly and he bumped down three of the steps.

Hersfeld surveyed the action with distaste. To Robert he said, "Mr. Winster was provoking but you are too sensitive." His eyes swept coldly over the sprawling figure and up to Kronopoulos. "However, I begin to understand why we have achieved so little up to now." He turned away and walked sedately down the steps. Kronopoulos's eyes darted about uncertainly and he followed. Teplitz and the limping Winster trailed after him.

The sky was darkening with clouds that hastened the twilight. They were alone on the hill and looked at each other in silence, as though for the first time. For Saxton here was a new Robert, purged of the brooding doubts, uncertain temper and inexplicable behaviour—a new man altogether, of a kind Saxton appreciated. For Jane, who knew the inner convulsion that had taken place, there was the untold story which she must surely hear.

And for Robert there was a lifting, exhilarating confidence that now, at last, he was equal to life and would no longer be bruised at every turn like a blundering man in a dark room.

They went slowly down the winding road to the tram stop. Still busy with their thoughts they rode in silence to Constitution Square. "The club, I think," said Saxton. "Less chance of interference there." He looked inquiringly at Jane.

"If you think I'm going home now, you're mad," she said. "Anyway, I'm a member."

They went to the club.

CHAPTER 20

THEY SETTLED themselves in the bar and Jane smiled at a passing officer. He hesitated and stayed. She made the introductions. "Mr. Scrivener and Mr. Saxton. This is Major Dundas."

After a curt how-do-you-do he gave his attention to Jane. He was uneasy, trying to convey something in the presence of strangers without letting them know what it was. "I don't know whether you are tied up this evening. . . . I'm being posted to Malta tomorrow."

"George, you didn't tell me!"

"I didn't know till this morning."

"I *am* sorry."

"That's the army. For me it makes a kind of special occasion."

"For celebration?"

"More than that." He was uncomfortable. "I thought perhaps if you weren't engaged we could . . . talk."

"I'd *like* to, awfully . . ."

He took the emphasis correctly. "Quite all right. Sorry to have butted in. I'll drop you a line."

His back view was stiff but somehow pathetic. Robert gazed after him with interest. "If I read the signs, that young man was going to propose to you tonight."

"To tell you the truth," she said, subdued, "I think he was."

"He looks all right."

"He's *sweet*," she said warmly. "Don't say a word against him."

"Suppose," put in Saxton, "we get down to cases. Beginning with why you have kept it to yourself so long."

Robert told them everything. There was a long pause, and then Jane put the question that screamed to be answered.

"The papers. Where have they been all this time?"

"Safe enough, I hope. I'll soon know."

"You know where the arms are hidden?"

"Not without the papers. But it will be easy enough—a simple description and a map reference."

"And you are going to look for it alone?"

"Not at all. I must see Professor Patianos."

Saxton got up. "I'll phone the University."

"Make sure it's the right man. Last time I got Kronopoulos."

"He's a friend of mine. During the war he was one of the main stations on the underground escape railway."

When he had gone Jane said, "I think it's absurd to carry on a private war like this. Teplitz killed your uncle and tried to kill you, and Hersfeld was responsible. They'll try again."

"I'm sure of it."

"Then why don't you go to the police?"

"With what sort of a story? With what proof?"

Saxton came back and said, "He's at the University now."

"I'll go along. Thanks." Robert got to his feet.

"By yourself?"

"It's my affair."

"We"—Saxton glanced at Jane for support—"have a silly feeling that we're in it, too."

Robert hesitated. Was this a return to dependence? "As you like," he said. It was cautious common sense not to be too much alone in the streets.

Saxton led them circuitously in order to pass his hotel. They went with him to his room. He produced from a drawer two pistols, one of which he gave to Robert.

"Just for possible emergencies," he grinned.

In a University workroom, they found Professor Patianos almost lost among rearing masses of stone, some shapeless, others showing themselves as detached heads of torsos or limbs. It was like some graveyard, white, solid, and faintly macabre in the crowded space of the room. There was nothing macabre about the professor. He was a tubby man with a bald head and a fierce moustache that curled up improbably high at the ends. At seeing Saxton he hurried forward with a cry of delight, took him in his arms and kissed him warmly on both cheeks. Robert thought of the moustache and shuddered.

"The major! It is so long ago—another world. I hear you on

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"The major! It is so long ago—another world. I hear you on

the telephone and I say to myself, Careful! The Germans are listening. That is what your voice does to me. But pouf!" He chuckled. "There are no Germans any more."

"Not as many as there were." Saxton introduced the others, who gave a nervous greeting. But it was all right; the professor confined himself to kissing Jane's hand and shaking Robert's. Then he stood back with his head on one side and his eyes half-closed, as though looking critically at a picture.

"A resemblance, but not strong. Your uncle had a broader brow. His death was a great loss, and a great sadness for me."

They found seats. Patianos was merely an expert, and there was no need to bring in the details that did not call for an expert mind. The outline was simple. A German expedition had discovered the arms of the Venus de Milo and hidden them; the news had reached Robert's Uncle John together with the evidence; and through him, Robert. What did the professor think?

Patianos listened, leaning forward with his hands on his knees and his eyes gleaming. When it was over: "From another, I should laugh and spit. The arms of Venus! They have been discovered before, three times at least. The world is full of rascals. But Spielter was a man of talent, though a German. Hersfeld, too, even more so. Together they can be wrong, as we all can, but is it likely? And to that we must add the opinion of your uncle. It is true he did not see the works themselves, but he examined the evidence. And he was convinced." He sprang to his feet. "The greatest discovery since the Aphrodite herself! The wonder of the world, whole and complete! Even to contemplate the notion calmly is impossible. I shall not fully believe until my own eyes see it." He flung out a hand dramatically. "Bring me the papers and together we shall see."

The conversation was split by a clap of thunder and a hiss of rain. Saxton crossed to the uncurtained window and watched the street emptying.

Patianos had no time for the weather. He strode up and down restlessly, a difficult operation among so much statuary. Now he was the thinker, hand to brow and surroundings forgotten. They

heard him mutter, "The Louvre," and laugh hollowly, presumably at the coming stupefaction of the French. He lapsed into Greek and stood poised, his left shoulder hunched and his arms jerking from one posture to another like those of a marionette. (I do believe, thought Jane, that he is *being* the statue!)

He caught her stare and relaxed with a shrug and a smile. He took Robert by the hand, drew him to him and escorted him to the door, arm round his waist.

"We shall meet again soon, and together we shall discover—who knows what?" He turned to Jane with a bow. "Dear miss, you are beautiful. As for you, Major, we remember, do we not?"

"We do. Would you be so kind as to show us out the back way? It's nearer for us in this rain."

"This way." He led them down a narrow staircase and unbolted a door on to the deserted street. Farewells were intense and took some time.

Robert was looking up and down. "This isn't a shorter way."

"We had an escort opposite the front door. I saw them from the window—Teplitz and Winster."

They ran for it, and in the shelter of the nearest bar, Saxton phoned military headquarters and asked for a car. Civilian or not, his standing was evidently still good. A car pulled up with a slither and they piled in. Jane was dropped at her hotel, and Robert accepted Saxton's invitation to join him at his. It was a measure of his new freedom that he could do so. There was no need to return to his private hide-out at Piraeus.

They shared a double room with door and window shutters bolted. Short of the place being blown up, nothing could happen before morning. But it was a long time before Robert slept.

Across the faded ceiling unrolled the events of the last months, seen fully and in sequence for the first time. They began with the party in Hampstead and stretched sinuously in time and place across Europe to Athens, to the flight to the island, to the return, and to the blinding revelation as he confronted his enemies. They stretched to this moment when he lay in bed and felt under his pillow the hard lump of the revolver.

CHAPTER 21

ALL MORNING and afternoon Robert kept to his room, waiting for the sun to go down. He felt the need of solitude and was grateful that Paul went off and left him alone. He smoked a great deal and lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling, thinking. But in reality there was little to think about. It was all straightforward and obvious. He had an early dinner at the restaurant opposite the Britannic. He looked up and down the crowded street before leaving but saw no one he knew.

Robert struck off the main road into the side streets on his left and began to climb sharply. Soon he was on the steep northern slope of the Acropolis. It was getting dark now, but he lay down on the parched earth to wait a little longer. There was no hurry and he must not risk failure.

Twenty minutes later he followed a little path round to the left and the broad steps to the entrance of the citadel. A modern gateway stretched between the towering columns of Pericles, fastened by an enormous padlock. Robert waited again to make sure he was unobserved and then was over the gate in one scrambling movement. Silently he mounted between the Propylaea and stopped at the pedestal that once supported the statue of Agrippa.

As a child he had imagined from the story books that the Acropolis was no more than a rocky base for the temple of the Parthenon. Not until his first visit had he realized that the Parthenon was only one part of it, a centrepiece occupying perhaps a tenth of the hill. Round it had once huddled a complete town, a refuge inviolate to assault; and though no trace of houses remained, the early Greeks had built their temples more durably. To the right of where he now stood was the tiny Temple of Wingless Victory, on a projection which dropped sheer to the Roman theatre on the plateau below. To the left was the Erechtheum, where the stone maidens supported the roof on their heads, effortlessly and for ever. Farther up the gentle slope soared the pillars of the Parthenon, slim and perfect even in their ruin.

He moved forward with care, trying not to scuff the loose stones. The Parthenon came within range of his straining eyes, and he went forward more confidently. He mounted the steps at the base and was on the flat floor of the temple, the dark sky above him, the forest of fluted pillars all around. He walked to the right and stretched out and hugged the corner pillar. He moved forward along the row from there, counting. At number eleven he stopped. Eleven. At the eleventh pillar he turned at right angles, descended the three steps and marched forward methodically. This was the difficult part, to keep direction. The low wall marking the edge of the hill showed up in front as a dark smudge. He reached it and threw his leg over. At the other side the drop was steep but not perpendicular; no place at all for scrambling on a dark night, but just possible. If his luck held he would not have to scramble much.

The main thing was a firm foothold, leaving both hands free. He found one eventually but was not certain how far he had moved from his original position.

The wall was made of uncemented blocks of stone, held together by their own weight. The surface was rough and lumpy, riddled with crannies, but firm. His fingers explored like tentacles, stroking, probing, pulling gently. He did not expect immediate success, and he told himself that after so many months he would be foolish to think of it. But the minutes passed. The calves of his legs ached from holding the crouching position.

It was not conceivable that someone had been there before him. He told himself so between gritted teeth, moving less carefully, not worrying about making a noise. His foot slipped and he broke into a sudden sweat as he reared back on balance.

Then he found it. A stone came away, almost throwing him back over the drop. The relief of discovery drove the danger away and his hand thrust into the hole. It struck the expected object, bumped against the cool smooth silk, reached greedily. More difficult than the apple tree but the same in kind. He stuffed the package into the side pocket of his coat, reached for the top of the wall, and stood on the safe ground of the other side.

"Keep still, please."

The insistent pressure at his waist was Teplitz' gun. His mind told him that and the shock of surprise numbed his body out of any movement. He froze where he was, half bending forward.

There was the black outline of the man, his head not eighteen inches away. He remembered their encounter on the English road and his fear. It was different now. Something clicked in his head, a lesson learned from Saxton. If it's dark for you, it's just as dark for him. And a second lesson. In the films it looks good to stick a gun in a man's stomach, but in real life keep a yard away.

Both lessons came into practice. Unseen by his opponent his fist smashed the barrel of the revolver from horizontal to vertical. His heel went behind the man and his right arm swung at his jaw. In the gloom it connected badly; the revolver cracked in a sudden flash of light and noise, and Teplitz stumbled back. He struggled to avoid falling, and before he recovered his balance fully Robert was doubling towards the Parthenon. In the shelter of a pillar he strove to breathe quietly and to listen.

There was no sound from the direction of the wall. Then came a grunt and the scrabble of a dislodged stone. Robert drew his pistol and fired into the darkness. The flash was too brief to show anything, but he heard an exclamation—of surprise, not pain.

They were equal now. Deliberately, recklessly perhaps, he had revealed that he too was armed and had thrown away the advantage of surprise. From now on each was the hunter and each the quarry. Rapidly Robert weighed up the situation. Teplitz had followed him to the wall noiselessly, so he could move off in the same way. He must be doing so now—the question was, which way?

To his left and to my right, Robert decided. He is aiming to get between me and the entrance gate. Sooner or later I must go that way, because there is no other escape from the hill.

If he guessed right then he knew what to do. Swiftly he crossed the breadth of the Parthenon, reached the farther pillars and took comfort from their fluted bulk. He descended the steps and peered into the gloom. Ahead lay the Erechtheum, but in the way were stones, broken columns, the bases of forgotten statues, a desolate

graveyard of sculpture. Even by daylight it was necessary to pick one's way with care. In this clouded darkness the hazards were frightening to contemplate. Speed was as important as silence. He must reach the temple and strike off to the entrance gates while Teplitz was still on his way or pausing to guess the next move. The warning shot had been useful after all, for the Czech would not dare move any faster than he did himself. But his laborious zigzag among columns and statues was anything but speedy. He avoided disaster but at the cost of painfully slow progress.

His direction was right and the Erechtheum loomed up as a black shadow against the dark grey sky. The maidens stared sightlessly across to the Parthenon. He wanted desperately to rest in the shelter they offered but he could not stay. He turned left and made for the next base, the stone bulk of the entrance. As he stepped from the shelter of the stonework he knew that his head was framed against the sky.

A flash and a roar and a hiss as the bullet went by. Too high, a foot too high. As he fell Robert reflected that Paul was right again: Snap shooting with a pistol above ten yards is hit or miss.

Teplitz must know that, too. He had fired in surprise, without thinking, or else he had trusted to luck.

There was only one thing to do—go after him.

Teplitz would be covering the gate, waiting for him to try to escape by the only way from the hill. Face to the ground, elbows spread, stomach flat, Robert levered forward and to the left. He must cross the sunken road where it was darkest and come round so that Teplitz was between him and the gate. In a series of silent twitches he wriggled ahead.

On the farther side of the path the looming stone gave safe cover and he could stand up. Down the hill now, on foot and feeling his way with his left hand while his right gripped the gun. In another ten yards he would reach the spot from which he calculated Teplitz had shot. With enormous luck he would still be watching the gate and Robert could clout him from behind.

He rounded a square plinth and immediately detected that something was wrong. It was dark but not black, and his shadow

should not be where he now saw it. It was not his shadow.

Both guns roared together and something like a hot knife cut through Robert's coat between his side and his left arm. He flattened himself against the corner he had just turned. Just below his ribs he could feel blood seeping through his shirt, but as far as he could tell he wasn't badly hurt. The time for concealment was gone and there was nothing left but to fight.

He lay flat and at ground level put his head round the corner. Not four yards away Teplitz lay crooked and still.

Robert got up slowly, walked round the plinth and stood looking down at the man. He lay on his back with his head on one side and on the front of his shirt was an irregular dark blob. Robert could not bring himself to touch the man. Teplitz was dead.

Let him lie. They would find him in the morning and it would be worth a headline before being dismissed as another grudge killing. The gun could stay, too. Robert suddenly felt weary. He had found what he came for and he had killed the man who tried to take it from him. He walked towards the gate.

Someone was climbing over.

CHAPTER 22

THE QUESTION was in German and Robert did not understand German, but he could not mistake the voice. As he drew back it asked something else, more irritably, and Hersfeld began to pick his way up the hill. He stumbled and a torch suddenly flashed in his hand. Evidently he had no doubts as to the outcome of the shooting. Behind the beam of light he advanced steadily until the torch focused on the body and remained there. With a grunt of satisfaction Hersfeld bent down. The grunt changed to a snarl, the light snapped off, and in one scrambling move he was behind a pillar.

Robert called softly, "In case you aren't sure, he *is* dead."

If Hersfeld was afraid or even startled his voice did not betray it. The harsh tones came across full of confidence.

"You can't get away, Mr. Garry, but I have a good mind to let

you go. They won't hang you, but have you any idea what it is like to spend a few years in a Greek jail?"

Silence and then the sound of Hersfeld's feet. He was not used either to the ground or to the dark and he moved clumsily. He was going not down the hill but up. In fear? It was unlike him. Picking his way with care Robert followed.

The rocky ground to the Parthenon was giving the German some trouble and he could not disguise his direction. Robert got the idea. Hersfeld would wait behind one of the pillars and wait for some noise from the open to give him a line.

Robert skirted to the right and advanced with the precision of a cat negotiating puddles. There were no landmarks in vision range, and he was relieved when the corner of the great temple loomed up. The advantage so far was with him, and he must keep it. But keeping it necessitated risk.

"I'm over here, Baron. To your left." Not much risk so far. The pillars were six feet across, a safe screen.

Hersfeld's shot was therefore the result of a flutter of panic. The bullet chipped marble and sang away into the dark. Robert grinned. He could picture the German peering into the gloom along the way he had come, the soft voice on his flank, the wild swing to the left, and the shot before reason asserted itself.

But the problem was still there. "I've got what I was looking for," he called. "Spielter's papers."

Surprisingly the answer was cool. "You've got them and I am going to take them from you and destroy them. With Teplitz you were lucky. Your luck is ended."

"Come and get them. Here I am."

"I will."

Against his will he felt a pang of uneasiness, as though the German had some authority he had not so far chosen to exercise. He shook it off; the dominance lay in the voice and nothing else, and it was bluff. "The Venus, Hersfeld. It's true, isn't it?"

"I found the arms. I shall find them again, but that will be after you are dead. You need not die, Mr. Garry, even now. Throw away your gun and we can end this absurdity."

It was laughable but it carried an eerie conviction. Hersfeld was inviting him to idiotic suicide and the rasping command in his voice almost persuaded obedience.

"What happens if I throw it away?"

"You will give me the papers, and I shall destroy them. After that we have no further quarrel."

"In fact, we might dine together."

"I mean it, Garry." No "mister" this time and the voice grated more than before. With reason, Robert thought. He is here under the sky with a younger and more agile man who has just killed his stooge. It's no longer a matter of planning and giving orders. What he wants to do he must do himself and he doesn't like it.

"You said you were coming to get them."

"Very well."

And he would come because there was no other course. Robert braced himself. All at once he realized that this was the moment that had been moving like a juggernaut towards both of them since that cold March day in London, and he welcomed it.

What happened next was so utterly unexpected and terrifying that his knees crumpled to nothing and he fell with his hands to his eyes. Without warning and without sound the night was split into a blinding world of light, agonizing and overpowering. It cut through the fingers over his eyes and through the lids with an intensity he could not bear, and he screamed.

Cowering and whimpering he fought to regain his nerves. In the city an engineer had pressed a switch and people were looking up at the pale loveliness of the temple. But here in the midst of it the metamorphosis was violent and horrible.

It was worse than blindness. He groped for his pocket and twisted his handkerchief round his eyes. The light snaked under the edges and round the folds but at least his hands were free. He groped and found the sharp fluting at the base of the pillar, scraped his foot behind him and touched the edge of the step. At the bottom of the steps he got to his feet facing down the hill and struggled to escape the glare that beat through his eyes to his brain. He stumbled and sobbed and waved his arms like clumsy



antennae, willing himself away from the shrivelling light.

And suddenly blackness just as intense. He was outside the perimeter of those savage lamps. He dared not stop but ripped the handkerchief away as he shuffled along. Behind him the flood-lights were like a cold sun and all round him was a darkness which seemed to press against him. His arms struck solid stone and he felt

his way round it. He shut his eyes tight and screwed them up, and when he opened them slowly the blackness was not complete. Like a man coming round from an operation he could detect wavering shapes, and below him were the stars. Below him? He was looking down at the city and he had very nearly stepped over the parapet of the Temple of Wingless Victory.

His nerves tingled. Physical danger was almost a relief, a bucket of cold water over his mindless panic. He was still on the Acropolis, and Hersfeld was still to be dealt with.

He had no notion of how the German had reacted to the terrifying blast of light but the recollection of him brought back practical things. The papers. He patted his left-hand pocket and was reassured. The right-hand pocket was light and empty. . . .

The gun was up there in the blinding whiteness, where it had dropped from his hand as he fell.

There was a noise, a voice muttering. His eyes were normal, and he could identify immediate shapes. Round the corner he had taken came Hersfeld, groping as he had groped. His gun was levelled in front of him, and he halted. Robert raised his hands.

The German advanced, and Robert fought hard not to close his eyes. The flash and the blast would be the last thing of all. But surely . . . Realization came, and he blessed whatever instinct had prevented him from speaking. Silently he stood aside and Hersfeld blundered past, gun still pointing at the distance he could not see. Robert was behind him. He reached over and in one clean movement snatched the gun. The German staggered and gave a croaking cry. Then he stood still, arms dangling.

"The parapet is to your left," Robert said. "You can sit there."

Surprisingly he sat and let his head sink in his hands. It had taken him longer than Robert to get away and it was taking him longer to recover. He rubbed his eyes and peered about him.

In the end his head settled in the direction of Robert, sitting six feet away on the low wall. Robert was glad. It could make no real difference but he was glad that in the final act he was not dealing with a man who was blind.

Hersfeld spoke thickly. "Your eyes are younger and they came

back quicker. That is the only difference between us."

"The only one?" He got the impression that the German was examining him as closely as the gloom allowed.

"To make a wrong judgment of people is a serious mistake, and I have not done it often. I find it hard, Mr. Garry, to believe you are the man I lunched with in Soho. If I had known you as I do now my actions would have been otherwise."

"In what way?"

Hersfeld spoke sombrely. "I have found that it is a risk to trust subordinates who are not German. In Germany I could have found men to obey me with efficiency. In that case you would now be dead, instead of . . ."

Robert was glad again. Hersfeld recognized the coming necessity and accepted it. It strengthened Robert but it did not still his queasiness. Disposing of Teplitz almost without knowing it was one thing; this was another. With an effort to steady his voice he said, "There isn't much time."

"Time does not matter. No one will come." He stood up, and Robert stiffened, but the man made no move to approach. "If I may ask one thing?"

"You may ask," Robert was wary.

"I should like to do this myself—to make my last action positive. It will also make things less complicated for you."

I'm a coward at the last, Robert thought. In this way I can pretend to myself that it was not my doing. "Very well."

Baron von Hersfeld swung his legs so that he was sitting on the farther side of the parapet. He raised one arm in what appeared to be a valedictory salute, and he was gone. He made no sound as he fell, and the ground was too far away for the crunching arrival to be heard.

CHAPTER 23

PATIANOS was enjoying himself.

"It is a point I hope to discuss with you on some less stirring occasion, a point of philosophy. Like all of us I am concerned with

ethics, and I ask this: the unspeakable misery which the Germans inflicted on us in Greece, the starvation and the pain and the degradation—will posterity find they were justified by the discovery they made on Melos, that we are to unearth? As a Greek who has feelings and memory, I reply hotly, No. But as a citizen of the world . . . We can conclude that even from the bestiality of the Nazis good may come by accident.

"And the position of the arms? It is of more importance than the song the sirens sang and the name Achilles took when he lived among the women."

Saxton was puzzling over the directions. "A pity Spielter wasn't an army man. Say what you like about the army, British or German, but it can plot a point."

"But the evidence, Professor?" Jane asked anxiously.

Patianos shrugged. "Scientifically, we have none. Spielter may have told lies and Hersfeld may have been wrong. Mr. Darlow may have been grossly deceived. But all three of them believed in the arms of Venus, and I believe also."

"So now we find out." If Saxton was moved by the thought he gave no sign of it. "The car's late."

Only Robert was silent. Jane looked at him with concern. In the hot morning sun his face was grey and drawn and when he was spoken to he answered briefly. It was as though in handing the papers to the professor he had been left empty and exhausted and without further interest in what they led to.

Perhaps it was because he had killed Hersfeld. She was sure he had. The papers spoke of his death as an accident. They also reported that an unknown man was found shot. Since the papers thrived more on political scandal than on violence, and neither corpse was associated with immediate scandal, the two events were mentioned and dismissed. But Jane knew. Robert had killed them, and because he was not used to killing he became silent and unapproachable.

A big car honked through the traffic and pulled up. It was driven by Colonel Marshall, chief of the British Military Police. "I thought I'd come myself. It's a nice day for an outing."

Saxton gave a faint smile and nodded and Patianos shook Marshall fervently by the hand. They all got in, Saxton beside the driver.

"North," he directed. "That much is easy. After that we'll see."

For a time they wound along the congested road in silence.

Marshall drove with concentrated attention. Patianos sat back with folded arms and looked stern. And Robert sat there without expression.

"Left at the fork," said Saxton, the map on his knees.

Someone on the road ahead jerked a thumb. He was in khaki shirt and slacks, and Marshall pulled up.

"Thanks, pal." They squeezed over in the back. "I'll tell you when to drop me off." He grinned at Robert. "Haven't seen you in a long time. Coming for another look at the dam?"

"Not now. This is Mr. Proctor, who works for Mr. Peppercorn." He made the introductions.

"I've been in the village paying off fifty men. Not nice. But the job's done, and if they've put something by, they'll be clear of the bread line for a few months. If they have. You know something? I haven't met one of these Greeks who carries a dime of insurance."

Jane was not impressed. "But perhaps they're still happy."

"You'll pardon me, ma'am. One of my men was killed on the job last month. What's for his wife and five kids? The poor-house? They don't even have a poor-house."

"You are critical, Mr. Proctor." The professor spoke with courtesy, but his moustache was bristling.

"Sorry, Professor. I forgot you're a Greek. I bet you carry a load. Of insurance, I mean."

"In your own phrase, not one dime. But we have another quality. The widow you spoke of will be cared for by kindness."

"Sure, sure." He patted the professor's knee. "You folks just out for a run?"

Patianos said impressively, "For you this is merely a ride in a car, Mr. Proctor. What you do not realize is that you are becoming part of history."

"That's so?" He turned to Robert. "Have you seen the chief lately? He was up here two—three days ago for the party, and he collected a hang-over in a million. There was something to celebrate, too. We finished the dam only five weeks behind schedule. That's a record to be proud of in this business." He tapped Marshall on the shoulder. "This will do me. I go down the dirt road here."

"Not far now," said Saxton, as they drove on. They were in a defile and the sun on the rocks on either side was flung back at them so that they gasped for air. "After the next kilometre stone, take the fork."

The opening was half hidden by scrubby trees, and the track was a tangle of old ruts baked hard. They were flung against each other and Marshall pulled up.

And now at last Robert felt something stir inside him. This was the place he had lived with consciously and unconsciously ever since he had read Spielter's testament long ago in London. It was here the German convoy halted, that Hersfeld impressed into service the Greeks who must later die. And near here, so very near, was the little quarry that was the cause of it all.

Patianos led the way, striding majestically in the wrong direction. Saxton called after him, and they paused while Marshall wound up the windows and locked the car. They were silent now and for the first time they looked to Robert, by unspoken consent asking him to lead them. Even the Greek, after a mighty clearing of his throat, sensed the atmosphere and stood waiting.

It was as Robert had imagined it and he paused long enough to wonder at it. The reality so often differs from the image and smudges it away. But here the reality fitted so exactly that he could almost believe he had been here before. The heat and the sandy rocks, the brittle faded bushes, the track winding away to the right . . .

Would it be the same in the quarry? Would the image, so strong that it was almost oppressive, take him to the spot and let him say, "Here"?

They were watchful and he must make a move. He shook off thought and walked down the track. The air was still and the grasshoppers sounded above the crunch of his shoes. He turned the bend in the path and stopped. It was too narrow for the others to pass and they stumbled to a halt as he stood there.

The noise in his throat began as a laugh and ended as a dry sob so that Saxton jumped forward in case he fell.

Where the quarry had been there shone the water of a man-made lake and beyond it reared up the dazzling whiteness of the dam.

POSTSCRIPT

It was how long ago? Eleven hours. I, Robert Garry, shall get used to thinking of it. The relief now was to be away from people, away from their silence while they groped for something to say, and then the halting platitudes. Without Paul it could have been even worse than it was. What he talked about I haven't the faintest idea, but it made it all just bearable, and once I believe we even laughed.

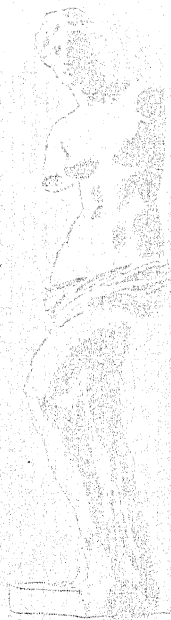
The girl did her best, too. She was searching for something to say, something to show it was not so bad after all, and she couldn't find it. She is leaving. On tomorrow's plane—for Malta. Why Malta? Of course. So I was right about the young major. I'm grateful to her, for listening to me, for being able to unload what was pressing me down. I wonder how much she will tell her major.

Patianos was quiet at first, but I should have known he would not be subdued for long. An explosion was building up, and meeting Peppercorn in the hotel lobby touched it off. For a moment I thought he was out of his mind. So did the American. He stood there and gaped while Patianos yelled imprecations, and he had no idea at all why. But at the word "treasure" he brightened up. They could send divers down, maybe, if it was all that valuable? (He obviously had some picture of a chest full of diamonds.) But how can a diver find something which is not on

the bed of the lake but buried at an unknown spot in the earth below it?

I left them at it—Patianos screaming and Peppercorn stuttering in bewilderment. They didn't notice I was going, except Paul, and the little smile he gave wasn't seen by anyone but me. But it was good-bye just the same.

I am going home. The thing is over and it has failed, yet I am not the same now; I have grown. There will be times to come when I shall be afraid, and then I shall remember how I was afraid with greater cause. I shall not come to harm.



John Appleby



JOHN APPLEBY is a Yorkshireman who worked his way on scholarships through Leeds University and then found a reporting job on the great northern newspaper, the *Yorkshire Post*.

Five years later, in 1939, he joined the staff of the B.B.C., writing news stories and giving news talks in the overseas service; he was one of the team that originated the feature "Radio Newsreel," which has now been running for nearly fifteen years without a break. In 1942 he joined the Intelligence Corps and froze in the Shetlands, screening escapees from German-occupied Norway and helping to send back agents. Later he was transferred to the Psychological Warfare Division of the Foreign Office and went to Algiers to work on United Nations Radio.

When the British army entered Greece in the autumn of 1944, John Appleby went in too, to help in putting Athens radio back on its feet. From the first he fell in love with the country and its people. Now, after travels which in the last ten years have taken him to fourteen countries in Europe and Africa, he is back with the B.B.C., editing overseas news bulletins.